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3 Soggy soil solutions: Lucy Chamberlain explains how to protect against waterlogging

4 Grow your own sweet chestnuts with Anne Swithinbank's top tips

10 SIGNS OF LIFE IN YOUR WINTER GARDEN

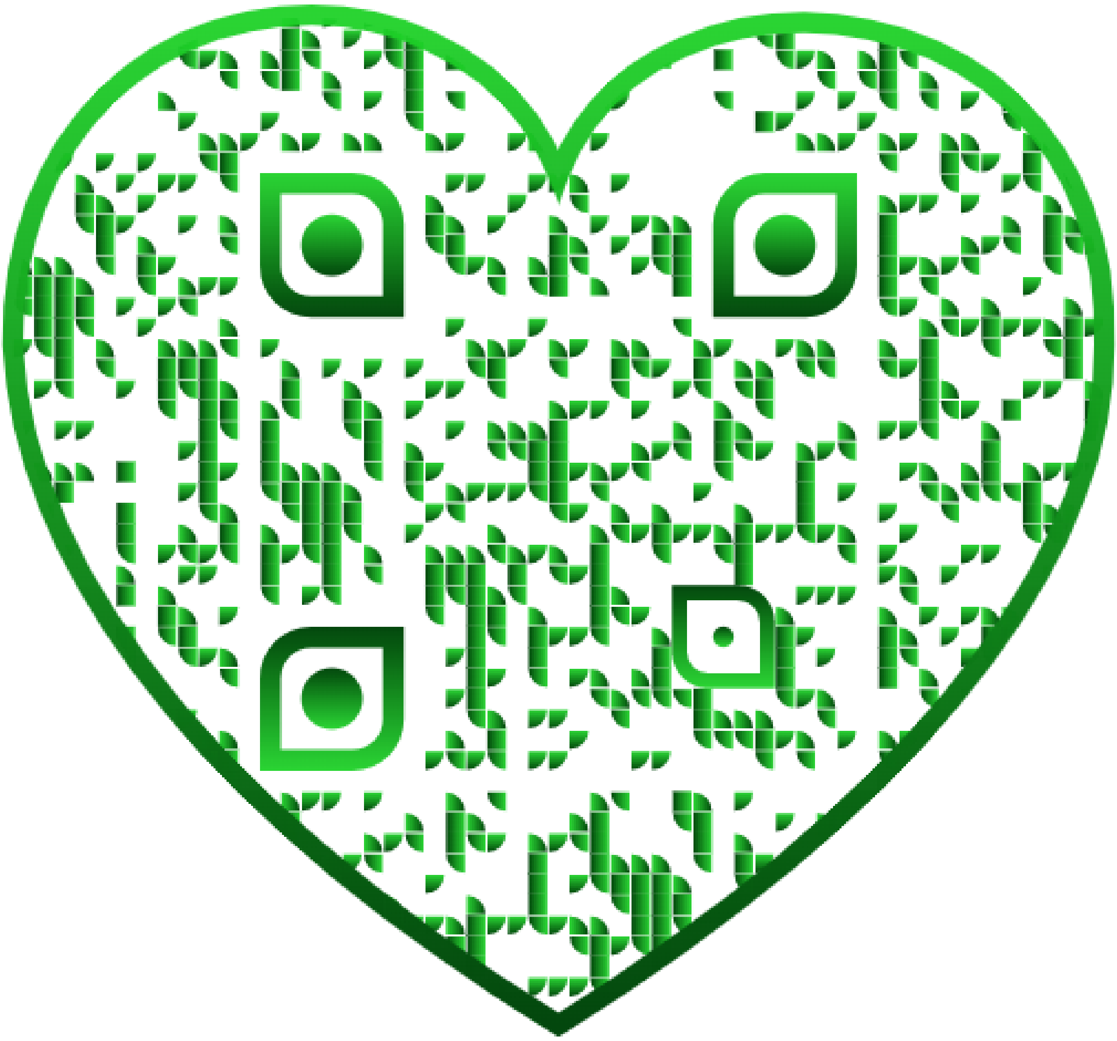
Mike Palmer explains how the natural world is getting set for next year

HAPPY HOMEMADE

Kim Stoddart shares lots of ideas for great gifts for free

HOW TO CREATE A PERMACULTURE PARADISE

Niall McCauley's fantastic and fruitful garden



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Amateur GARDENING 141 years of practical advice
1884 The world's oldest gardening magazine 2025

A warm welcome

Traditional and homemade joy

You are reading the world's oldest gardening magazine, a publication that has seen so many trends come and go over its 141 years of publication. Our team is always looking forward to sustainable, productive gardens for the future, with wellbeing and wildlife at the forefront of our minds, yet there is always so much to be learnt from the past.

From traditional crafts to simple pleasures, community and care. The homemade, the hand whittled, the ability to make best use of what we find growing around us feels so incredibly good. It's wholesome, it's low-cost and it's surely part of the solution for a more enjoyable, resilient form of gardening for us all.

In this bumper Christmas Special, which hosts extra features, extra free seeds and extra love from your friendly family of experts, we take inspiration from some of the lovely skills of yore with a very enjoyable article from *AG* newcomer Ross Pearson. Toby Buckland talks about the many uses of wild bracken for bug hotels, protecting planters and festive wreaths, Mandy Bradshaw writes about the many forms of holly and Andrew Oldham and I wax lyrical about traditional Christmas celebrations and homemade gifts.

There are still plenty of lovely excuses to get outside and look for signs of life in the garden, which Mike Palmer writes about beautifully. And of course there are plenty of jobs for the fortnight from the fantastic Ruth Hayes and our Garden Media Guild Awards' Practical Gardening Journalist of the Year, Lucy Chamberlain.

Rosie Irving makes the case for a retro revival for marvellous mahonia and we get a wonderful 'white' Christmas with Ellen Mary's feature on snowdrops and Liz Zorab's pick of her favourite bright white blooms.

Niall McCauley gets us all excited about his guild garden, which is an inspiring permaculture paradise; Bob Flowerdew muses about what to buy, and not to buy, for gardeners, and we learn about some beautiful indoor blooms for a stylish Christmas with Michael Perry, plus much more besides.

Just a reminder that our bumper Christmas issue is on sale for three weeks, and then it just leaves me to say Yuletide good wishes to you, dear reader. We wish you a restful and radiant festive period and look forward to more merry gardening adventures with you next year.

In this issue our merry band of brilliant expert *AG* contributors include Ruth Hayes, Bob Flowerdew, Mandy Bradshaw, Graham Clarke, Anne Swithinbank, Lucy Chamberlain, Michael Perry, John Negus, Mike Palmer, Andrew Oldham, Liz Zorab, Chris Collins, Rosie Irving, Toby Buckland, Ross Pearson and Ellen Mary.

We hope you enjoy everything we have put together for you.

Please keep writing in. We love receiving your ideas, letters, questions, musings and poems. The spirit of *AG* continues rejuvenated, working towards a brighter green future for us all, together.

Kim x

Kim Stoddart *AG*'s editor-in-chief

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ISSN: 0954-8513

Amateur Gardening
Kelsey Publishing Ltd.
The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill,
Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

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UK Subscriptions 01959 543747
https://shop.kelsey.co.uk/amateur-gardening-magazine

Distribution in UK
Frontline Distribution Solutions
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT

Distribution in Northern Ireland & Republic of Ireland
Newspread Tel: +353 23 886 3850

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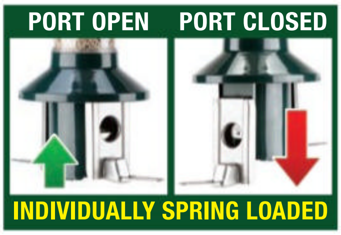

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Contact us:
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- **Website:** www.amateurgardening.com

NEXT ISSUE OUT
3 January 2026

ipso. Regulated

Your NEWS FORTNIGHT

Bringing you some of the gardening news highlights

Common toads lay strings of spawn in spring

© Shutterstock

Volunteers needed to spot frogs and toads this spring

Sightings are used to help protect vital habitats

The changing climate is affecting more than just our gardens. The increased frequency of milder winters is changing the life cycles of the UK's native reptiles and amphibians. This month, Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT) has launched its annual PondNet Spawn Survey and everyone is invited to spot and record sightings of frog and toad spawn in garden and community ponds, and in the wild, and log it in the Trust's national database.

The trust has been collecting data on sightings of breeding frogs and toads since 2012, and the 2024 survey was the biggest so far, with 2,657 records submitted.

FHT Technical Director Dr Naomi Ewald said: "As one of the first signs of spring, it can be very exciting to spot frog and toad spawn early in the year.

"We know that increasingly mild wet winters are pushing the breeding season of amphibians earlier and earlier, and we always see the season start in the South West and spread up the country."

The collected data allows the Trust to identify 'priority ponds' that have a particularly high conservation value. Signs that common toads are breeding automatically confers priority pond status.

The survey runs until May 31, 2026, and sightings of spawn can be logged at: recordpool.org.uk

Further details of the FHT can be found at: freshwaterhabitats.org.uk

'Amazing Grey' is a new poppy to Unwins

42 new seed varieties from Unwins

Unwins has added 42 new seed varieties to its catalogue for 2026, to suit every garden and gardener.

Its accessible range includes small-space ideas such as windowsill peas and peppers that can be grown in containers and hanging baskets.

In addition, there's a 'pollinator playground' range and collections designed for flower arrangers and anyone inspired by the cottage garden aesthetic.

Unwins spokesman Arty Speroni said: "We want to make growing from seed fun, accessible, and inspiring for everyone. These new collections are designed to spark ideas, whether you've got a big garden, a balcony, or just a sunny windowsill."

STIGA to help care for the nation's rugby pitches

Leading garden and grounds care machinery manufacturer STIGA has been named Official Groundskeeping Partner of England's Rugby Football Union (RFU).

The partnership reflects STIGA's commitment to ensuring world-class playing surfaces for sports players at every level.

Claudio Borges, RFU Executive Director of Commercial and Marketing, said: "Having the best pitches and training facilities is paramount to any professional team's performance, and we are delighted that we will be getting support on this from STIGA."

Right: Officials from the RFU and STIGA celebrate their new partnership

Good summer helps butterflies bounce back

The warmth of summer may seem a distant memory now, but it was good news for the UK's butterflies, which experienced a welcome surge in numbers.

More than 125,000 people took part in the 2025 Big Butterfly Count and data collected afterwards revealed that numbers were well up on 2024, although this only returned butterfly populations to 'average' levels.

In news that will come as no surprise to gardeners, the most recorded butterfly was the large white, followed by small white and red admiral.

The day-flying Jersey tiger moth also had a good year, but holly blue and meadow brown butterflies had poor results, although that may have been because the browns were on the wing earlier than usual and had largely finished flying when the count began in July.

Dr Richard Fox, Head of Science at Butterfly Conservation, said: "We may feel like we've seen lots of butterflies this summer, but that's only because last year was so awful.

"There remains a need for us to take urgent action to support our butterfly populations."

Above: It has been a good year for Jersey tiger moths

© Shutterstock

Garden centre chain takes Christmas into hospices

Blue Diamond is donating trees and arranging Santa visits

Blue Diamond Garden Centres are bringing Christmas joy to where it is most needed

This Christmas, Blue Diamond Garden Centres are donating festive trees to hospices located close to their 52 outlets.

From Preston in Lancashire to St Peters on Jersey, the company will be distributing Christmas trees and arranging special visits from Santa himself, spreading joy, sharing gifts, and creating magical moments for patients and their families.

The heartwarming move comes after the garden centre company teamed up with Hospices UK, the national charity for hospice and end-of-life care that represents a community of more than 200 hospices across the UK.

Blue Diamond's Group Relationship Manager, Jill Kerr, said: "We are honoured to partner with Hospice UK during this special time of year.

"Hospices play an extraordinary role in providing compassionate palliative care, helping people live with comfort, dignity, and love. Supporting their work is truly a privilege.

Every year, hospices care for 310,000 people living with life-limiting conditions or facing the end of their life. They also provide bereavement counselling and practical support to the families and friends of those they care for.

Hospice UK's Mike Clarke said: "We are so grateful for this wonderful act of festive goodwill from Blue Diamond which will help to bring comfort to the residents and families that we care for.

"Many hospices are really struggling at the moment, so support like this really matters. I hope it inspires other companies to support their local hospices too."

AG writers bag prestigious Practical Journalist of the Year award for second year running

AG's Lucy Chamberlain has been named Practical Journalist of the Year at the 2025 Garden Media Guild Awards. Lucy, who writes our popular fruit and veg pages, was presented with her accolade at a glitzy lunch at the Savoy Hotel in London. Other writers shortlisted for this category for their writing in *AG* this year were Anne Swithinbank and Mike Palmer, and last year editor Kim Stoddart scooped the award.

Judges praised Lucy's pages for their accessibility and clear instructions for growing a wide range of edibles.

Lucy said " This award means the world to me, it really does. I really want to thank Kim Stoddart for allowing me to write in such a personable way - it's such a great magazine - and also my husband who is unofficially my photographer and does a sterling job, directed by yours truly. Happily, marital bliss still continues in the Chamberlain household. "

This year *AG* mag was also shortlisted for the prestigious Publication of the Year award and many of the team were there on the big day. Kim said: "What a fabulous event, we were thrilled to be nominated in so many categories and are delighted with Lucy's win - which was so well deserved and it's always so great to see so much love for *Amateur Gardening* magazine. We work in such a lovely supportive industry."

Above: Kim, Ruth, Anne and Toby get in the spirit of the GMG awards at the Savoy Hotel in London Inset: Lucy Chamberlain with her Practical Journalist of the Year award

Two new forests will boost employment and conservation

New forests set to boost communities

Two new national forests are to be developed to bring nature closer to people.

The first will be along the Oxford-Cambridge corridor, and a competition will launch in early 2026 to determine the location of a second forest, either in the Midlands or North of England.

The new forests will see millions of trees planted and provide employment and nature recovery, and make outside spaces more accessible.

Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds, said: "Our woodlands are vital for regulating our climate, supporting wildlife, and increasing access to nature for us all.

"Our ambitious tree-planting programme will help unlock growth, restore nature and create green jobs for the future."

Donation helps school create an allotment

A school near Portsmouth has a thriving new allotment thanks to a donation by housebuilders Pye Homes.

As a result of the funding, children at Porchester's Northern Infant and Junior School Federation have a newly designed allotment area with 16 planters and some new recycling bins, creating a clean and sustainable space for eight of the school's classes to learn and grow.

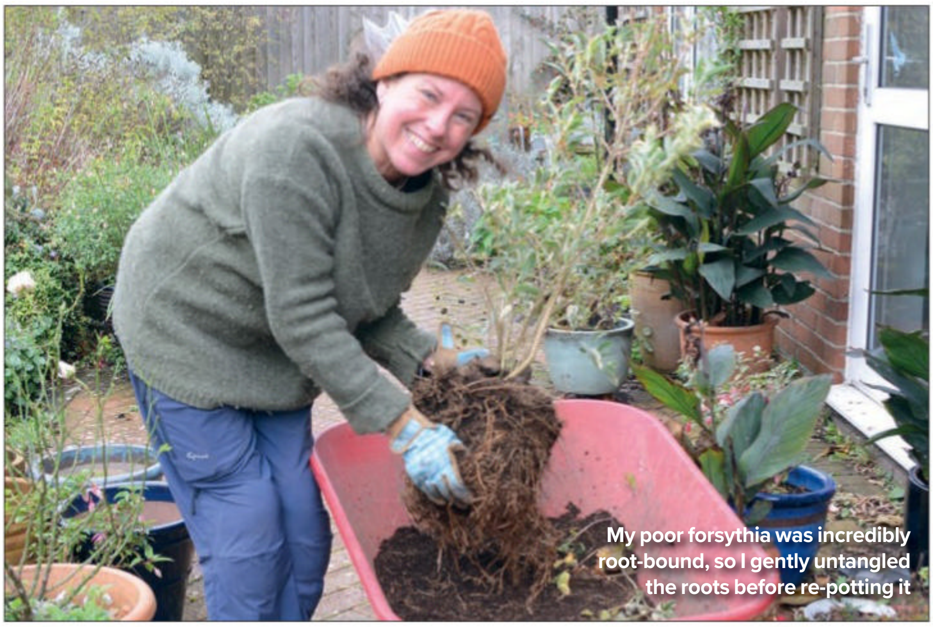
Karis McMahon-Lane of Pye Homes said: "We're especially proud to have contributed to an initiative that not only enhances the school's outdoor learning environment, but also reflects our shared commitment to sustainability."

Above: **Children will grow and learn thanks to £1,000 donation**

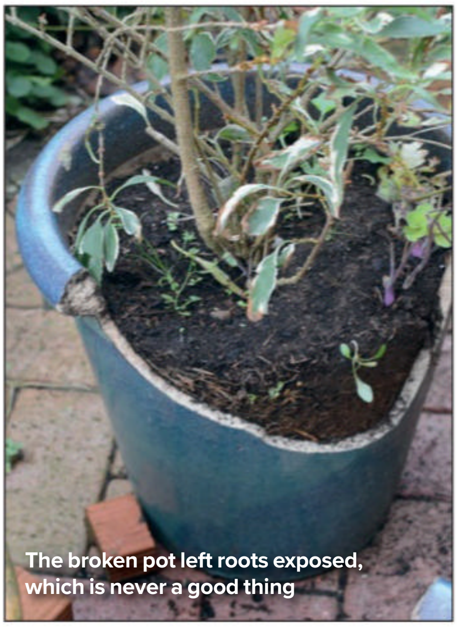
Are you involved in community growing projects where you live? Send in your news by emailing **editor@amateurgardening.com**

Your GREAT GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with *AG*'s **Ruth Hayes**



My poor forsythia was incredibly root-bound, so I gently untangled the roots before re-potting it



The broken pot left roots exposed, which is never a good thing

Saving a shrub in a broken pot

Exposed roots could have spelt the end for my forsythia

Snatching victory from the jaws of defeat is always a sweet feeling, especially when at first it feels like something of an effort to do!

Take, for instance, the saga of our young, potted variegated forsythia. It's a beautiful thing but over the summer, I noticed that it needed much more watering than the other potted shrubs.

A morning or afternoon too long without water and its pretty leaves started to droop in a way that made me feel extremely guilty - though obviously not guilty enough to do anything other than water it again, because there seemed to be many more pressing things to be getting on with.

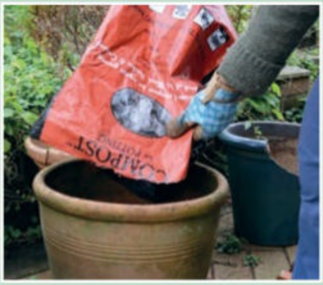
So I made a mental note to re-pot it next spring, and left it there, until one morning last month after a stormy night, I noticed that the forsythia had been blown right over and a large chunk of its ceramic pot was missing.

This forced my hand because a portion of the roots was exposed and if left thus would have done the plant no good, so I had to re-pot it there and then. And this is where serendipity stepped in, because on removing the plant I saw that the roots were so bound and constricted that it was no wonder it had been unable to take up enough moisture through the summer.

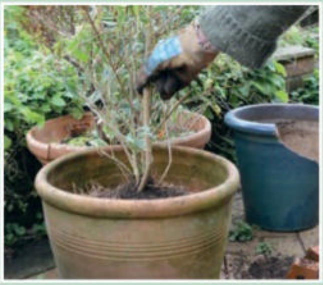
So, even though re-potting the forsythia was a job I could have done without, I'm glad I had to do it because the broken pot revealed the plant's predicament and allowed me to solve it.

Wishing our wonderful family of *AG* readers a very happy Christmas and New Year, and I look forward to continuing our gardening adventures together in 2026.

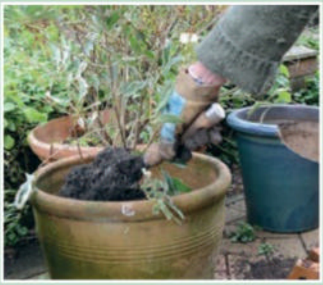
How to re-pot a patio tree or shrub



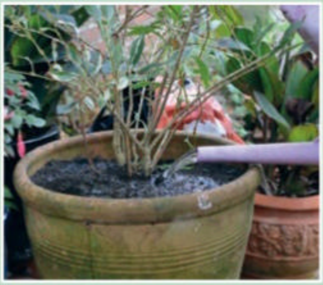
1 Choose a pot one size larger than before, place crocks in the bottom and start to fill with peat-free compost.



2 Make sure you plant your shrub at the same depth it was growing before. Too deep or too shallow and it won't thrive.



3 Now add compost over and around the roots, pressing it down to support the plant and knock out air pockets.



4 Raise the pot on feet and water generously. Check the compost regularly to ensure it doesn't dry out.

All images unless otherwise credited © Ruth Hayes

Prune free-standing apples, pears and quince in autumn and winter, but avoid doing so on frosty days Inset: **Cut back branches to an outward-facing bud**

Go pruning for a breath of fresh air

Get your free-standing fruit trees in shape for next year

While I love Christmas and all the accompanying festivities and socialising, I also like to have some solitary time in the garden.

One of the jobs to get on with now is pruning our free-standing quince, apples and pears and other deciduous trees and shrubs.

Pruning gives me a lot of satisfaction and once you know the ropes and commit to doing it annually, it can be a pleasant, meditative job.

Overgrown and neglected trees need more thought and are best tackled over three years, cutting back a third each time so that two-thirds still produce blossom and fruits. Hard-pruning the whole tree at once can knock it back for a couple of years.

Remove dead, damaged and diseased growth and any spindly branches, plus those that are growing inwards.

The aim is to create an open goblet shape that lets sunshine and air get to all the flowers and fruits, keeping them healthy and growing well.

When pruning, cut to an outward-facing bud and remember the most important advice of all: look twice and prune once, because you can't stick it back on once it's off!

Run shears over close-leaved potentilla bushes to keep them trim

Birds' festive feast

Leftovers will help feathered friends

- The most wonderful time of the year is also one of the hardest for our garden birds, and they will really appreciate a few Christmas dinner leftovers.
- Avoid anything salty or smothered in turkey fat, as its soft texture can get smeared on their feathers, which damages their ability to keep themselves waterproof and warm.
- But roast and mashed potatoes and parsnips, chopped stuffing, nut roasts, bacon rind and stale cheese are packed with good fats and nutrition.
- Dried fruit and chopped nuts, stale fruit cake, Christmas pudding, mince pies and stollen are all loaded with energy-giving ingredients.
- Provide a constant supply of fresh water, clear away uneaten food before adding new bits and wash bird feeders every week to prevent the spread of disease.

Grated cheese is packed with good fats and nutrition

Cutting back grape vines and figs

It's time for me to cut back our grape vine and fig tree.

Both can withstand a hard prune, which is a good thing as both are vigorous growers.

Our vine is grown up a wall and trellis and all I need to do is cut back the year's fruited growth to two buds then tie new stems to the trellis.

The fig tree grows against the same sunny, south-facing wall and this year it provided us with a glut of fruit.

Not all ripened, so my first task is to remove and compost these mid-sized figs as they won't ripen next year. The ones to leave in place are the fingernail-sized growths that will become next year's harvest.

Again, I prune out inward-growing, spindly branches and any that are crossing and rubbing.

Remove suckers emerging from the base, then weed around the roots and mulch with well-rotted compost or manure.

Above: **Grape vines can be pruned hard and will come back strongly next year** Inset: **Remove and compost this year's unripe figs**

Plant your garlic in early winter so it benefits from a cold spell

Plant garlic so it benefits from the cold

Get your cloves in now for next year's flavoursome cookery

Discard any cloves that are soft or don't look healthy

Traditionally, garlic is planted before Christmas because the cloves need a good spell of cold weather to taste their best - so I'll be planting mine over the next few days.

It's a very satisfying crop to grow and it always cheers me immensely to see the first brave shoots appearing from the soil in winter when very little else is in active growth.

Garlic will do best in a sheltered, sunny spot and we grow ours in raised beds, though it will also grow well in large containers.

If you have heavy clay soil, you can also start it off in modules in the autumn and plant out in spring when the cloves are growing and the soil is starting to warm up.

I tread the beds down before planting, so the growing roots will be held firm, and plant the cloves 15cm (6in) apart in rows 30cm (12in) apart. The cloves go in at around 2.5 to 4cm (1 to 2in) deep.

I always buy seed garlic from our local garden shop and never use supermarket cloves as they are often treated with chemicals and may also transmit diseases to the soil.

Break open the bulbs and separate the cloves, disposing of any that are rotten or don't look healthy.

Make sure each clove is well below soil level as hungry birds are apt to pull them from the ground and snack on them.

As your garlic grows, keep it well weeded, and water during prolonged dry spells.

Snap off flower stalks if they appear and use these 'scapes' roasted and in stir fries.

Start broad beans

Hardy varieties give an early crop

ABOVE: I start broad beans in pots in our unheated greenhouse

- I like to plant my broad beans in early winter in anticipation of an early crop.
- I start them in small pots or modules in the greenhouse, then harden them off and plant them out into a bed enriched with well-rotted compost.
- My variety of choice is hardy 'Aquadulce Claudia' or 'Super Aquadulce', which can withstand the winter cold and produce a good number of pods.
- Once in the soil, spaced 15 to 23cm (6 to 9in) apart, I water during dry spells and keep them well-weeded.
- When the first small pods start to form, I pinch out the tops and this encourages bean growth and also deters blackfly aphids that like to cluster around the soft new shoots.

Giving an amaryllis a new lease of life

Two years ago our amaryllis (*Hippeastrum spp*) flowered like never before, its stem almost as tall as me (no great challenge, but still!).

It has done nothing florally since, despite annual re-potting, so this year I have decided to give it one more chance.

In summer, I moved it to the greenhouse and let its leaves die back naturally, and when I took it from its pot I discovered that the original large bulb had rotted, but a smaller healthy bulb with a decent root system was sitting alongside it. So I've removed the old bulb and popped the new 'baby' into a snug pot of fresh compost with the tip of the bulb poking out.

Having been watered, it's now sitting somewhere warm and light, though out of direct heat and sunlight, and I'm looking forward to some impressive blooms in early spring.

Above: Last time it flowered, the stem was almost as tall as me! Inset: The healthy new bulb next to the original dead one

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Your VEG GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with Lucy Chamberlain

How to carry on growing food over winter and some soggy-soil solutions

Lucy shares a selection of satisfying seasonal jobs for the weeks ahead

Lucy explains how lots of lovely leaves and other edibles can now be reliably grown indoors over winter with LED lights (inset)

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Gone are the days of not being able to grow a wide range of food in winter due to lack of light and warmth. Of course, we've always been able to grow brassicas, leeks, parsnips and other hardy veg outside, but the likes of herbs (basil, chives, mint, oregano, coriander), leaves (annual spinach, lettuce, pak choi) – and dwarf forms of tomatoes and chillies, plus snackbox cucumbers and strawberries – have remained out of reach, until now.

With a combination of easily accessible, affordable equipment, alongside the know-how accumulated by a swelling number of urban growers who have to re-think the boundaries of their growing spaces, this area of gardening is now thriving. The result is an extension of the growing season by months, not just weeks, with seasons being stretched for the grow-your-owner's benefit.

I've written many times about my love of heat mats and cables for boosting root warmth, and these items are becoming available for all budgets and capacities.

Of course, central heating will, in itself, supply heat for indoor growers, so let's turn our attention instead to light.

While you can buy T5 and HID lights, the greatest advancement in amateur indoor growing has been provided by LED lights. They're inexpensive, energy efficient, come in a variety of size options and – importantly – can be easily adjusted to supply specific, appropriate light wavelengths for any edible. Whether you want red light to stimulate your chillies and strawberries to flower, or blue light to encourage more foliage on your spinach and basil, LEDs can offer it. Timers, dimmers, reflectors and height adjustors all make this tweaking of the duration and intensity of artificial light simple.

Once your lighting (plus heat and water source) are set up and you've got yourself some liquid feeds (high-nitrogen, balanced, and high-potash), you're ready to go. Start off seeds of quick-to-grow edibles such as lettuce and pak choi, or buy plants of others like strawberries and mint. If growth seems uncharacteristic, adjusting the light intensity/spectrum should remedy things. Fungus gnats can be controlled by keeping the upper compost layers dry, and/or using biocontrol nematodes.

Essential structure maintenance

✿ There's no doubt that growth has slowed down on the plot with winter's arrival, but this doesn't mean that we have to. Getting on top of jobs now eases pressure come spring and summer, and my raised bed edges and fruit supports are both suffering. Timber preservatives these days are less environmentally harmful (hooray) but the wood rots more quickly as a consequence. So, we're replacing rotted lengths of my raised bed edging board (the corners seem especially hard hit) and many wooden posts used to support fruit (these have rotted at the base – I'll most likely replace them with metal ones which, while more costly, will last far longer). Look, too, for cracked panes of glass, leaky vents, shattered downpipes, torn shed roof felt, broken hosepipe reels, flat wheelbarrow tyres and dripping tap fixings – you'll be so grateful you did come the new growing season.

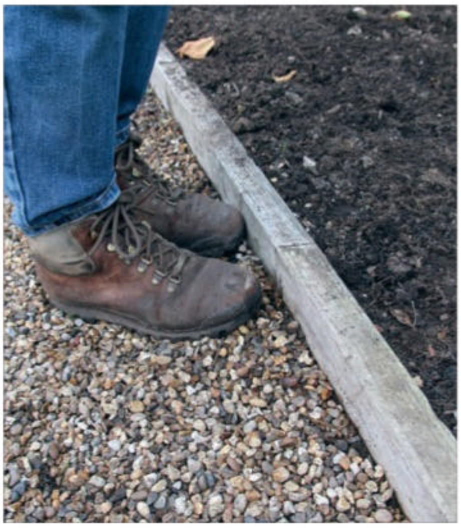
This is a great time of year to do some repair work in your garden

All images unless otherwise credited © Lucy Chamberlain

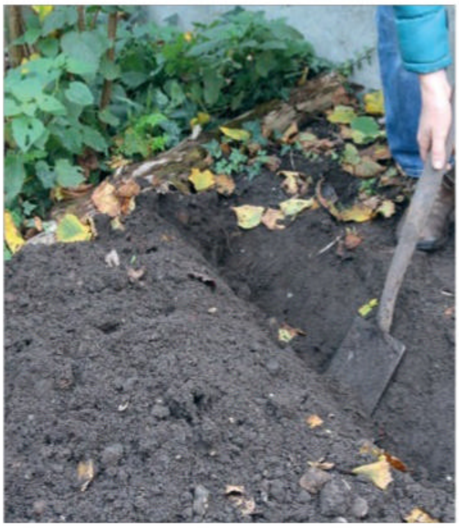
Step by step How to remedy plot waterlogging

With gluts and dearths of rainfall becoming the norm, those of us on potentially boggy soil may find our vegetable or fruit crops temporarily (or permanently) saturated. While we can go so far by choosing edibles that tolerate these conditions - just how much wasabi can one family eat? - it may feel time to intervene, so what are the main options open to us?

1 **Light waterlogging:** The simplest way to alleviate claggy soil is to add ample quantities of bulky organic matter (well-rotted garden compost or composted bark chips). These substantial sources of organic material help soil cope by improving soil structure and adding air spaces. Consider applying good quantities of grit or sand, too.



2 **Moderate waterlogging:** Raising the soil level (in addition to adding bulky organic matter and grit/sand) will help to continually drain excess water away from plant roots. Edging beds is optional – you can do this with timber/steel edging (potentially costly unless you can upcycle something) or, for smaller budgets, simply mound the soil.



3 **Excess waterlogging:** A bit more ingenuity and permanence is required. Work with any soil you have to create large ditches and smaller gullies to drain away excess moisture (along with the other steps I've mentioned). A soakaway (a gravel-filled pit topped with soil and turf) at the lowest point can hold some – but not all – water.

Using wood ash on the plot

Top tip

✿ If, like me, you've been snuggling up by the wood burner this winter, you may be generating a lot of wood ash, which can be useful as a soil or compost heap additive. It contains potassium, a major element encouraging flowering and fruiting, and can raise soil pH levels, which can help deter club root on brassicas.

If you plan to use it, store it dry then work it directly into the soil/compost, otherwise the potassium gets washed out. Bear in mind, also, that the potassium level can vary depending on the age of wood used (young contains more than old). If you know potato scab is troublesome on your plot, or if you have a bed of acid-loving plants like blueberries, avoid applying it there as the accompanying rise in pH can be detrimental. Otherwise, feel free to snuggle unashamedly in the name of plot enrichment.

Right: Wood ash can be a great soil improver, Lucy explains how she uses it

Your VEG GARDENING FORTNIGHT

with **Lucy Chamberlain**

Why not try…?

Sweet mace

✿ Are you a lover of French tarragon but want something that thrives in hotter, drier summers? Then let me introduce you to sweet mace, known botanically as *Tagetes lucida* and sometimes called Mexican marigold, a short-lived perennial that can easily attain a height of 80cm (31.5in) and has a taste very similar to the aforementioned herb.

It's a half-hardy species, so will get through mild UK winters if planted in a sheltered spot, but not harsher ones, and it's grown in exactly the same way as bedding tagetes (with allowances made for its final height, of course). Source seeds now, and sow under cover in late March or April, to plant out into a sunny spot come late May. If not regularly pinched out, rich yellow pollinator-friendly flowers will appear in mid and late summer.

Lucy recommended sweet mace as a drought-tolerant alternative to French tarragon

5 quick jobs…

1 Try takling root cuttings to propagate edibles. Mint and horseradish readily work, but so do raspberries, blackberries, figs and globe artichokes. Select healthy roots, lay 2 to 3cm (around an inch) deep in a tray of compost, place on heat mats and keep just moist. Pot up once new shoots appear.

2 One of my favourite jobs is autumn raspberry pruning – all life's frustrations dissolve as you cut each and every cane down to soil level. Try cutting some down only by half (the remaining part will then fruit in summer, after which it can be cut out) but don't feel obliged as it detracts from the main harvest period.

3 Do you need to complete some scrubby winter pruning? Then save some of the cut stems as peasticks and/or beanpoles. I've got a stand of hazel that supplies me with all the sticks I need, but willow, dogwood and birch are all well-known alternatives that add a rustic look to the kitchen garden.

4 If you're itching to get ahead on your plot but the weather isn't playing ball, grab some light oil and the sharpening tool(s) of your choice to maintain your bladed items. Secateurs, loppers, shears and the like will all work far for you better if given a good edge, and it's a systematic, satisfying job.

5 Keep dipping into your stores, not only to cook baked apples, celeriac gratin, roasted beets and creamy mashed potatoes, but also to check up on the health of said fodder. Rodent nibbles, rots and withering can all destroy your harvests if left to fester.

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Small space | Big ideas

With **Chris Collins**, Garden Organic's Head of Horticulture

Chris explains how to plant and care for bare-root fruit trees

How to boost results with bare-root fruit trees

Chris Collins shows you how easy it is to grow fruit trees and shrubs from bare-rooted plants

I love home-grown fruit and even in a small garden, a compact fruit tree or bush can provide plenty for pies and crumbles. At this time of year, there are lots of specimens to choose from as it's the prime time to plant while they're dormant. I always go for bare-root trees and shrubs for their value for money and ease of planting.

'Bare root' simply means a dormant plant without any soil around the roots. They're usually delivered in a plastic bag, rather than a container, and because they don't have any leaves they can look like a bundle of sticks and roots. But don't worry! Come spring, you'll soon start to see your tree or bush come to life, with little shoots forming fast.

A small hole like this can work, but Chris recommends digging a bigger, square hole to help tree roots spread and establish better

Always inspect the roots of your bare-root plant and trim any damaged or very long specimens over 30cm (12in). This will make them easier to plant and stimulate new growth. I like to soak bare roots for a few hours before planting to rehydrate them.

Prepare soil before planting

For the best fruit production, choose a sunny and sheltered spot out of strong winds. As your plant will likely be in the same spot for many years, good soil preparation is key. I'll dig a hole at least 20cm (8in) deeper than the roots. If your soil is a heavy clay or silt, cultivate an area two or three times larger. If you're planting into grass, dig in the turf when creating your hole as it contains valuable nutrients, and keep the base of the tree clear of grass and weeds.

Place your tree into the hole so that it sits at the same height as the original soil mark (a darker colour on the bark). It's particularly important with fruit trees not to bury the graft union (the bump at the bottom of the stem just above the roots). This helps to avoid rotting or risking the rootstock taking over.

Give bare-root trees the best start with Chris's expert advice

Spread the roots evenly within the planting hole and backfill, firming with your hands as you go. Once the hole is full you can gently firm the soil around the tree with your feet. This is to make sure there are no air gaps around the roots and that your tree or bush is cosy and comfy for the growing season ahead.

For more advice on organic gardening head to **www.gardenorganic.org.uk**, where you can also find out how to become a member and support the charity.

Chris's Q&As

Q I can't plant my tree straight away, what should I do?

A It's important the roots don't dry out. Keep them wrapped in wet newspaper until they can go in the ground, or plant temporarily - called 'heeling in' – in a shallow trench of soil. The plant can stay like this for around six weeks until you're ready to plant it into its final position.

Q I've heard it's better to dig a square hole, rather than a circular one?

A This is partly because square holes are much easier to dig - but it's also because circular holes 'hold' the shape of the hole once backfilled. They act as a giant pot forcing roots to circle around at the bottom. Square holes have corners instead where roots can break out and spread further

Q How much water will my bare-root tree need after planting?

A Water well after planting, and water regularly during the first year, particularly in dry weather. A bucketful of water per tree each week should be sufficient. A shallow depression around the base of the tree can create a water-retaining basin and you can also mulch to reduce water loss.

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Happy homemade festive gift ideas

Editor **Kim Stoddart** shares some ideas for great no-cost gifts from the garden

At this time of year I love to see what I can forage from the garden for homemade gifts and decorations. Doing so provides me with an excuse (as if I need one) to wrap up warm and wander around the garden pondering ideas. It's so often the case that the more you look, the more you see, and before you know it (generally when you relax), some creative inspiration will undoubtedly float on by.

Foraging for the home and for gifting, either with nature's bounty, up-cycled items or charity shop finds, is never just about the money-saving. It's about the joy of simple yet meaningful care and consideration of what's in our gardens, of reducing waste and investing in our potential for creativity and homemade joy. You don't have to be a crafting expert to benefit from some good old-fashioned make, mend and decorate.

What you create doesn't have to be elaborate either, and the process of making is as enjoyable as the final products, giving you space to switch off and tune into the natural no-cost abundance at large. It's so empowering - and it's fun! Whether it's decorations for the home, presents for friends, family and neighbours, or some thoughtful gifts for garden wildlife, there is much magical merriness to be had.

There is a wealth of colour and beauty in the winter garden that lends itself perfectly to free festive decorations and gifts

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3 ideas for garden decorations for the home

You don't need traditional holly or other evergreen and berries - every garden will have something to offer. From seed heads and twigs, to foliage, hips, berries, lichen and moss, the natural world provides many free materials for creative inspiration. So have a look and see what takes your fancy, cutting and picking items that draw the eye, then with your pile of natural 'goodies' to hand have a look in the home to see what vases, jugs, jars or plates might be combined for eye-catching festive displays.

1. A table/sideboard display

This can feature a central candle (on a plate or in a Kilner jar) surrounded by evergreen, holly, rosehips or twigs, pinecones and berries, or it could be a vase filled with twigs and rosehips. There is no right or wrong here, it's about what looks appealing to you.

2. Homemade wreath

There are many ways to go about this, from the leaf wreath outlined by Andrew Oldham on page 42 to the elaborate displays seen here by Frances Brown (see @frannygbrown on Instagram) using seed heads such as honesty and alliums mixed with dried flowers, evergreens, berries and twigs. You can make a simple wreath frame using dogwood or willow tied together with twine and then simply weave the foliage through the twigs and with florists or garden string.

Above: **Seasonal wreaths can be made from a wide range of materials, from traditional greenery and berries, to dried leaves, seedheads and twigs**

© Frances Brown (see @frannygbrown on Instagram)

All images unless stated © Kim Stoddart

3. Foliage 'tinsel'

Our ancestors would bring the outside in over the Yuletide, which would then be hung around the home in attractive impromptu displays. It's easy enough to do the same today for lovely natural decorations.

Further idea

As a sociable idea, why not suggest a foraging walk with friends to source materials for homemade decorations?

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Above: **Bird feeders can be made out of all sorts of household items such as this old whisk filled with seed fat balls for birds**

2 ideas for our wonderful wildlife

Of course natural leaf mould piles and no-dig gardens provide many habits for our precious wild inhabitants, but why not treat them a little more with a few homemade flourishes this festive season? It's fun to do and feels like we are further celebrating the role the natural world has to play in our gardening efforts.

1. Easy bug hotel

This can be as simple as a tin can or old shoe stuffed with twigs, leaves, cardboard, bits of bamboo cane and twine, left in a bed or border, maybe surrounded by a few stones or bricks to create an attractive insect shelter. On page 70, Toby talks about how he loves to use bracken for ground beetles and this sort of 'hotel' will benefit many beneficial garden helpers at this time of year. It's enjoyable to salvage for materials to use for the promise of many natural pest patrol helpers to hand into 2026.

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Fashion a simple but cosy bug hotel using old washed tin cans filled with twigs, moss, pine cones and pieces of bamboo

© Shutterstock

Above: **The half-shells of coconuts can be hung in trees as natural-looking bird feeders**

2. Canny coconut bird feeder

You can work with many materials to make a bird feeder like this, it's anything you can make holes in that can be safely hung from a tree. A coconut shell lends itself well, but see what else you can find to work with. These can then be hung and filled with food for our feathered friends.

3 present ideas

It's lovely to put some thought into giving to others and that can be done with little overall cost. Whether for friends, family or neighbours, care and consideration goes into the making of homemade presents from your garden, as this can feel very empowering and joyful at this otherwise very expensive time of year.

1. Repurposed flower pots

It's lovely to find old pots, jars or jugs that can be turned into pretty little plant holders for the home over winter. You might have some pansies or cyclamen growing in your garden that can be potted up, otherwise these floral winter stalwarts can be bought relatively inexpensively from your local garden centres.

Above: **Plant up small pots of winter bedding or edible leaves to bring into the home**

© Shutterstock

Above: **Bring some joyful colour into the house this winter**

2. Gift your time

Why not reach out with the offer of help to someone in their garden? This might be especially nice for someone who might otherwise be struggling with certain tasks. The offer of even an hour or two can go a long way - and it can be an excuse to socialise in the process.

3. Plants for next year

See what you have got to share and pot them up for others. From strawberry or raspberry runners, to cuttings you've taken from this year. Why not give the gift of homegrown harvests for 2026 to others and spread the abundance from your garden that bit further?

The Climate Change Resilient Vegetable Garden
How to grow food in a changing climate

We'd love to hear your homemade gardening gift ideas for into the new year (why stop at Christmas?) - please write in and share and those three selected by the team will win some seed and a signed copy of Kim's book *The Climate Change Resilient Vegetable Garden.* Email *kim.stoddart@kelsey.co.uk*

Experienced gardener Kim offers plenty of ideas for growing under cover

Undercover growing

Kim Stoddart provides some money-saving tips for undercover growing

Having the ability to grow food all year round will save money on your shopping bill and enable you to access fresh-as-you-like produce, from polytunnel to plate. There are also many other ways to be financially wise with undercover growing, and here are just a few ideas for thrifty inspiration.

Grow some perennial/semi perennial plants

Yes, of course a polytunnel lends itself so well to the growing of tomatoes, aubergines, cucumbers, chillies, peppers, melons and the like, but it can be useful to also make room for plants that will keep cropping year after year. No doubt you will have lots of perennials growing outside, but growing some varieties undercover is also beneficial.

Above: **Enjoy earlier harvests of purple sprouting broccoli for more seasons**

Above: **Savour tender asparagus spears when they're really fresh**

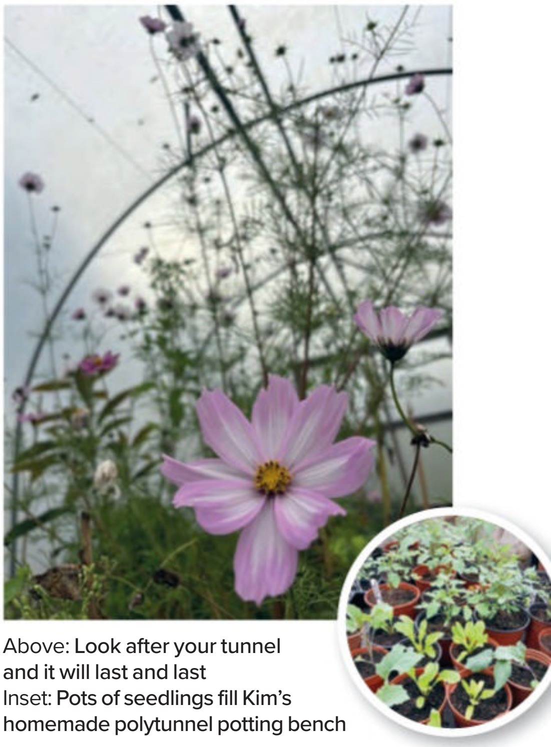
I have a little asparagus patch inside one of my tunnels as well as on the veg patch, so I get more asparagus growing earlier - and who doesn't want that? I also grow perpetual spinach, lavender for culinary use, thyme, Vietnamese coriander and purple sprouting broccoli (which isn't technically a perennial, though it can grow for many years undercover).

Save your own veg seed

It's so easy to do this with a polytunnel, as the seed won't become mouldy so readily as it is protected from the rain. It's straightforward to pick, dry and save from a variety of crops including true-to-type stalwarts such as lettuce, rocket, radish, French bean, parsley, tomato and chilli, and it's fun to experiment with others.

Above: **Saving the seeds of lettuce could not be easier undercover**

FIRST TUNNELS


Above: **Look after your tunnel and it will last and last**
Inset: **Pots of seedlings fill Kim's homemade polytunnel potting bench**

Make your own potting benches

I have a lovely sturdy bench made from old pallets and I also use salvaged tables and, during the summer, wooden benches to house my many trays of seedlings before planting out. Your undercover spaces provide lots of potential for earlier seed sowing and plant protection, which can boost results and save money on plants both inside and out in the wider garden during the growing season.

You can use salvaged items such as old windows and shower frames to create cold frames and employ reused fleece to offer extra protection within the tunnel during periods of the coldest weather, further enhancing growing potential.

Looks after your tunnel and it will last and last

This is key, and with good quality materials, who knows how long the plastic will last before it needs replacing. The suggested lifespan is around five to seven years before the UV light starts to diminish the material, but I have one tunnel with plastic that is more than 17 years old and plants are still growing strongly inside.

Make sure you clean your tunnel plastic as dirt and debris can cause erosion and tears over time, and also ensure that any holes that you might accidentally make are covered with polytunnel repair tape as soon as possible.

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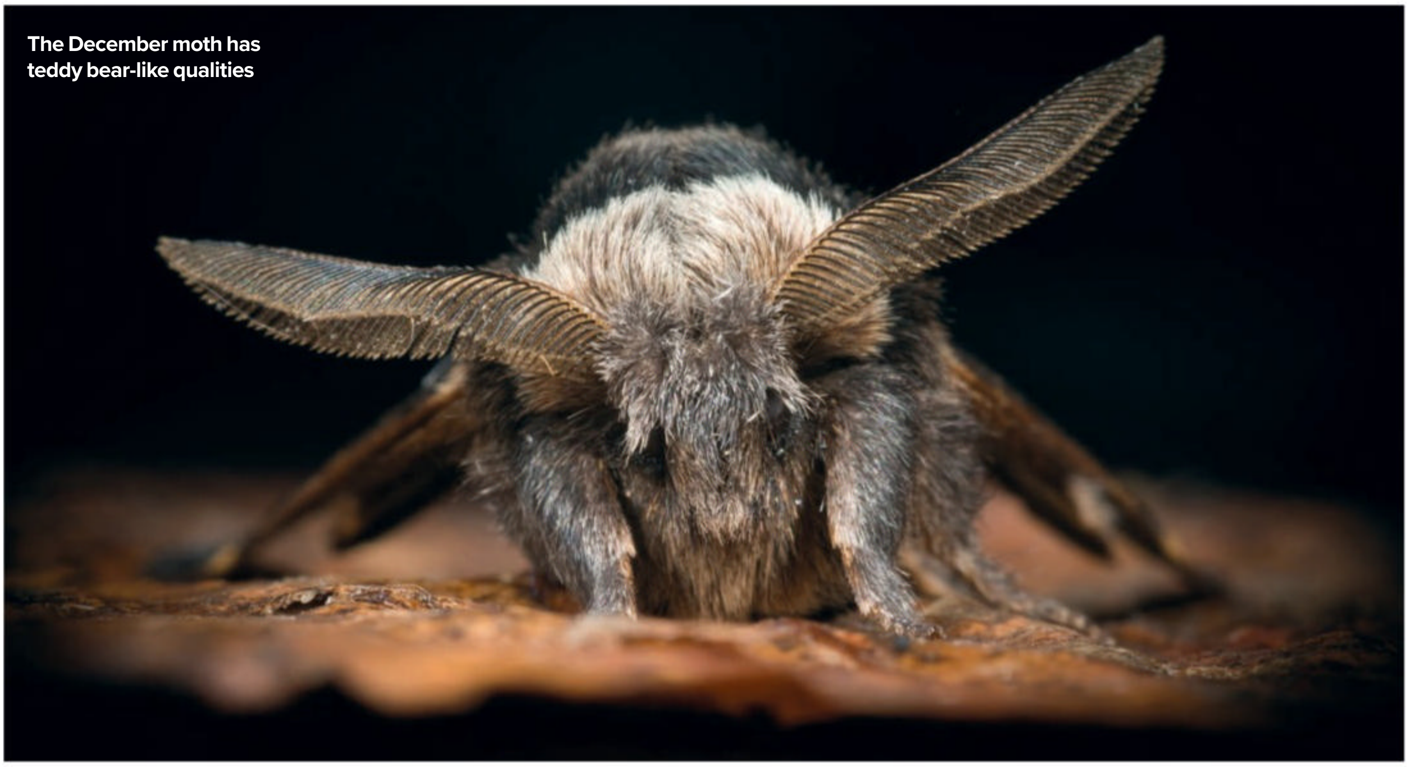

The December moth has teddy bear-like qualities

The 'teddy bear' moths of winter

Trunks of trees, windowsills and even pieces of wood are favourite spots for resting

Jenny Sheldon from The Wildlife Trusts encourages us to make the most of the season's nature

Gazing through the December drizzle, it's hard to imagine there's much going on in our gardens right now. A few leaves cling to freezing trees, while the colourful wings, buds and buzzings of summer are long gone. All feels silent, dormant, even dead. But while much of nature has faded, flown or hunkered down, there's still wonder to be found.

Just as winter is to summer, moths are to butterflies – subtler, more understated but no less beautiful. The December moth (different to the winter moth) is one of the few moth species found during the colder months. A chunky, medium-sized moth, it's recognisable by its praline-brown and caramel colouring – like one of the good chocolates from the posh selection box.

Resting with wings closed, it forms a heart shape, and if you're looking at a male you might be able to spot his feathery antennae. There's a teddy bear-like quality to these beauties, with their resplendent fluffy heads (even their legs are fuzzy) which help them fend off the winter chill. They can be found clinging to windowsills or the trunks of trees in gardens, parks, woodlands and hedgerows across all parts of the UK. The best time to see them in flight is by night, around streetlamps.

December moths have praline-brown and caramel colouring

Snuggling up to pupate

In spring and summer, December moths exist as grey, hairy caterpillars, feeding at night on the leaves of oak, elm and poplar, and resting during the heat of the day. Then, come October, they snuggle under bark or dead leaves to pupate, before pulling on their fur coats and taking flight. The adults don't feed at all, using instead the reserves they built up as caterpillars to concentrate on finding a mate. The female, larger than the male and without the fluffy antennae, lays eggs on her native tree of choice, and there her eggs remain until the following spring.

Like all moths, they form part of a healthy garden ecosystem. To thrive, they rely on native trees like oak, birch, elm, hawthorn and blackthorn – species which they have evolved alongside. They, in turn, provide food for other creatures and help pollinate plants.

Moths and butterflies are known as 'indicator species', meaning they tell us about the health of our environment.

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December moths remain fairly common, but overall the picture isn't good. The number of moths in the UK has decreased by 33% since 1968, and 50 species have become extinct in the past 100 years. It's hard sometimes to know how to tackle such an overwhelming issue, but by supporting wildlife in our own gardens we give nature the hope of sunnier days ahead.

Frequently asked questions

Q Should I worry about December moth caterpillars munching my plants?

A These moths do rely on oak and other tree leaves to feed their caterpillars, but thankfully are unlikely to strip your trees bare. Unlike many invasive or introduced species, they have evolved alongside our native tree species, existing together for thousands of years. As for your clothes, don't worry. December moths aren't into cashmere!

Q What are the December moth's predators?

A Birds and bats are this moth's main predators. Great tits and blue tits have evolved to lay their eggs during peak caterpillar season, so having these caterpillars in your garden will provide an invaluable natural food source for any newborn chicks in your nestbox. Cuckoos – though you're unlikely to see one in your garden – also specialise in hairy moth caterpillars like these.

Bats, especially the larger species, will gladly munch a juicy moth. But by flying in the colder months, when many bats hibernate, the December moth avoids this danger – possibly an explanation for having developed those cold-weather adaptations.

Q How can I help these moths?

A Keeping parts of your garden wild, and letting leaf litter lie, will give these and other creatures places to hide and rest. Many species of butterfly and moth rely on undisturbed log and leaf piles to keep them safe from rain, frost and predators during their delicate pupae stage when they are vulnerable. Avoid using pesticides, too.

Get 12 Days Wild

We've all heard, and perhaps found for ourselves, how spending time in nature is good for us. It can help us feel calmer and more mentally resilient, and have better all-round health.

But in the rush of daily life, it can be hard to make the time to connect with nature, especially in winter when daylight hours are limited. Yet when holiday planning goes into overdrive and the lack of sunlight may even bring on SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder), this is arguably when we need nature most.

The festive break - especially those strange days between Christmas and New Year when no-one knows what day it is - can be a golden opportunity to step away from the daily grind, slow down and use nature to find moments of calm and perspective.

Each year, The Wildlife Trusts encourage everyone, of all ages, to do one thing each day for, or inspired by, nature for the 12 days of Christmas. Starting on Christmas Day, this festive challenge is all about connecting with the natural world and finding new ways to do so. You might choose to get crafty with the kids and make some nature-themed Christmas crowns or go on a welly walk at your local nature reserve.

Our gardens are great sources of inspiration and nature. Robins sing their sweet, trilling songs all year round, and you can listen out for blue tits and long-tailed tits calling each other as they flit restlessly between branches.

Tuning in to the birdsong around you opens a whole new world of enjoyment and understanding. Tawny owls call to each other at this time of year, exchanging flirty 'kewicks' (females) and 'hoohoooo!'s (males) ahead of the spring breeding season. The more you hear, the more you build up a picture of what creatures call your neighbourhood home.

Winter is a wonderful time for stargazing too, so while you're sprinkling reindeer food on the lawn, cast your eyes skyward to watch for slow-moving satellites or a bright planet. Unlike stars, planets don't twinkle.

Above: **Make a new friend during the Wildlife Trusts' 12 Days Wild Campaign**

Connecting with the outdoors is so good for children, feeding their curiosity and instilling a respect for the natural world and their place in it. Everyone has that core memory of connecting with nature, whether it's staying up late to go on a bat walk, rescuing a ladybird from a pond or feeding a robin by hand. These direct experiences stay with us into adulthood and shape the way we live. Also, small people often see more than us! Taking a winter nature safari with a child opens our own eyes to nature in new ways, making us look more closely and appreciate things that otherwise go unseen.

By connecting with nature we're giving ourselves permission to connect with ourselves, and those loved ones around us – a sentiment that can so easily get lost in the chaos of who's eating what, who's staying where, have we got a gift for so-and-so's kids, and did you remember to pick up the nice cheese (no, the **nice** cheese!).

So, if you have some time off coming up, give yourself and your family a little 'wild time'. Challenge yourself to do one thing a day for nature - and for you, for a calm Christmas and a happy, healthy New Year.

12 Days Wild runs from December 25 to January 5. For daily inspiration, wildlife facts and activities, sign up, for free, to: *www.wildlifetrusts.org/12-days-wild-wildlife-trusts*

The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts is a grassroots movement of 46 charities, committed to making the world wilder and helping ensure that nature is part of everyone's lives. No matter where you are in Britain, there is a Wildlife Trust inspiring people and saving, protecting and standing up for the natural world. With the support of our members, we care for and restore over 2,000 special places for nature. Every Wildlife Trust works within its local community to inspire people to create a wilder future - from advising thousands of landowners to connecting hundreds of thousands of school children with nature every year.

Holly is a shrub with much beauty and many varieties that has a place in our gardens all year round and not just at Christmas

Why holly is a shrub for every season

RHS expert Jon Webster tells **Mandy Bradshaw** why this evergreen beauty shouldn't be relegated to the winter months

Holly is often overlooked during the flower-filled summer months, but come winter it takes centre stage.

Generally evergreen, it provides the essential structure that gardens need to carry them through the quieter part of the year.

Holly can be used in a multitude of ways, from back-of-the-border shrubs to hedges or clipped topiary, and it's equally at home in informal and formal designs.

It's the boost that holly gives a winter garden that endears it to Jon Webster, curator of RHS Rosemoor, which holds the National Collection of Ilex.

"It really is a reliable plant for the winter months," he says. "Nothing gives the structural element, what I call the 'skeletal framework', to a garden quite like holly."

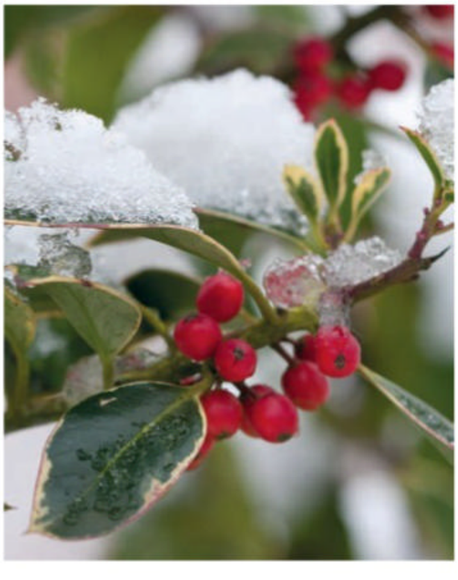
The collection at Rosemoor dates back to when the Devon garden was owned by Lady Anne Berry, a keen gardener and plant collector.

One of her great loves was holly and she built a sizeable collection, hunting out different varieties and swapping plants with other gardeners.

Since the RHS was given the garden in 1988, that collection has grown and today numbers 141 cultivars and 37 species.

"We've got some of Lady Anne's original hollies," says Jon. "Some have stood the test of time and are available and others aren't because either they are tricky to propagate or they've not got the appeal of the others to gardeners these days."

The collection is planted throughout the 65-acre site: "We dot them through the garden landscape and try to pick the best form for each area of the garden."



© Carol Sheppard RHS

Above: *Ilex aquifolium* 'Handsworth New Silver'

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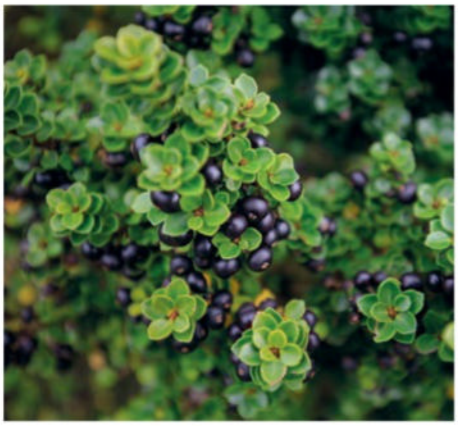
Above: Holly is actually very versatile and can be grown as hedging and shaped into attractive topiary

Holly is grown in most countries

Holly is found throughout the world apart from Australia, and there are more than 400 species. Some are low-growing forms that may reach only 30cm (1ft) tall while the tallest hollies can get to around 20m (65.6ft).

Our native holly, *Ilex aquifolium*, is a dark green evergreen with Christmassy red berries, but the range of leaves and berries available to the gardener is far wider.

Ilex aquifolium 'Amber' has orange-red berries and 'Bacciflava' has yellow berries, while *I. crenata* varieties have black fruit.



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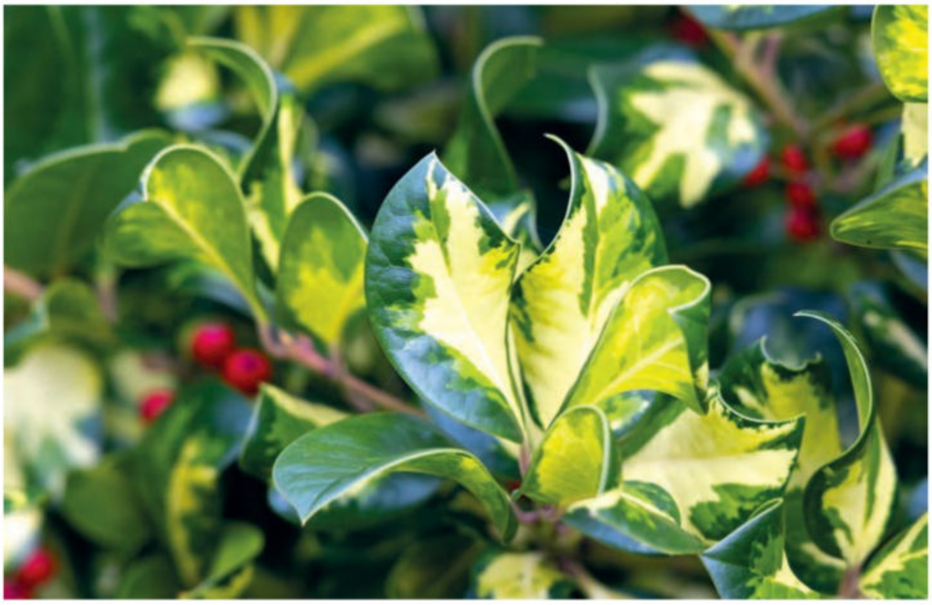
Above: *Ilex crenata* 'Dwarf Pagoda'



© Lee Charlton RHS

***Ilex* x *altaclerensis* 'Golden King'**

How to grow and care for holly

Holly is a tough plant that's pretty tolerant of most soils, although evergreen varieties prefer ground that doesn't get waterlogged. It will cope with shade but it's best to plant variegated varieties in a sunnier spot for the finest foliage colour.

Dig a hole that's big enough to take the roots comfortably and spike the bottom to improve drainage. Jon advises resisting the urge to add compost unless you have very light soil.

"If you're on heavy soil and add compost, the plants don't move out of the hole because it's too nice."

Instead, concentrate on improving soil around the plant, preferably as a mulch, avoiding getting too close to the holly's stem.

If you do add compost, avoid planting on top of it as the holly will sink as the compost breaks down.

The best time to plant is early autumn or spring as it gives the plant a chance to establish before winter.

Make sure the area around the holly is kept weed-free and ensure it has sufficient water during the first year.

Above: The best time to plant out a new holly bush is early autumn or late spring (*Ilex aquifolium* 'Handsworth New Silver' pictured)

© Shutterstock

Above: Japenese holly (*Ilex crenata*) is a small-leaved evergreen shrub ideally suited to growing in a container

Leaves range from plain green and those with a blue sheen to variegated types with yellow or white either as margins to the leaves or as a central stripe, such as *I.* x *altaclerensis* 'Lawsoniana'. This is also one of the varieties with almost no prickles.

Another is *I.* x *altaclerensis* 'Golden King', which despite the name is a female form. To add to the confusion, *I. acquifolium* 'Silver Queen' is a male holly.

While it's easy to think of holly as an evergreen, there are some deciduous types that come from swampy areas in America. Winter berry, *I. verticillata*, has red berries on bare stems and is often used by florists in Christmas bouquets.

With such a wide range there really is a holly for every garden and winter is when they are at their best. As Jon says: "Holly makes the garden come alive."

© Shutterstock

Above: Some varieties of variegated holly have dark green leaves attractively edged with cream or white

Container-grown holly

Smaller varieties of holly are also ideal for containers, either as shrubs or clipped into topiary, such as standard lollipops. *I. crenata* (Fastigiata Group) 'Fastigiata' forms a slim column that works well in a pot.

Choose a large container and fill it with a good quality soil-based compost, making sure there are sufficient drainage holes in the bottom.

Plant at the same depth as the original soil level and water well. Hollies in containers will need regular feeding, and watering during dry spells.

Holly is one of those shrubs that will tolerate fairly hard pruning – useful if it's outgrown a space or you want to shape it.

The best time to prune is in March or April, when you get a whole season of growth that will enable it to harden off before winter hits again.

Good planting companions

Holly can be used as a specimen tree or shrub either in a border or in a container. The darker-leaved varieties are also a great backdrop to other shrubs, including rhododendrons and azaleas, and to bright-coloured stems in winter, from things such as cornus or white-stemmed bramble, *Rubus cockburnianus*.

Pests and diseases

Holly is pretty resilient and suffers from only a few pests. The most common disease is holly leaf blight, a fungal disease that causes blotching on the foliage and then leaf drop, particularly from the lower part of the shrub. Pick up any affected leaves and burn rather than compost. Good air circulation is the best prevention.

How to propagate holly

Holly is best propagated through cuttings rather than seed as this will ensure a new plant has the same characteristics as the parent.

This is best done in October or November. At Rosemoor, the team put cuttings in an outdoor cold frame that's filled with horticultural sand and given a cover to keep off the worst of the winter weather, or put them on a heated bench. Cuttings will show signs of growth by the following summer.

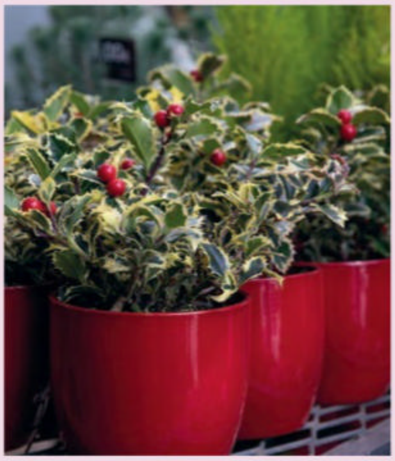
Buying tips

Hollies are long lived, so it's worth doing some research to find the best variety for your garden. Things to think about are its eventual size – do you want a tree or a small shrub – and foliage and berry colour. Small-leaved varieties are best for topiary.

If you want berries, make sure you buy a female variety, which will need to be pollinated by a male variety. Jon says there's a good chance a male plant will already be growing nearby.

"If wild holly is growing near your garden or if you're in an area with lots of other gardens, there will probably be something not too far away," he says.

In a nursery or garden centre, make sure the plant is a good one. Check the pot for discoloured soil, moss on the top or roots showing through the bottom indicating it is pot-bound.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Above: When buying holly, think carefully about the size and variety you are looking for, and make sure pollination is possible locally if you are after scarlet berries

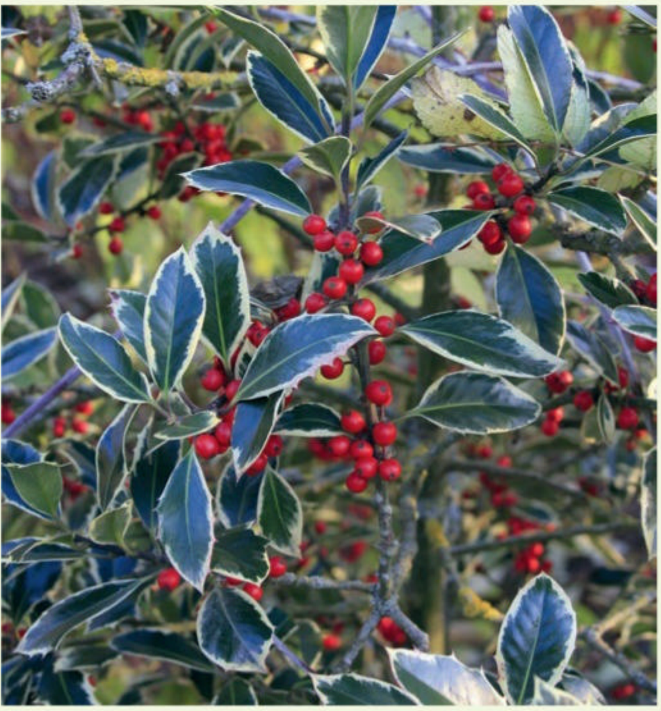
WHERE TO BUY

Burncoose Nurseries
www.burncoose.co.uk

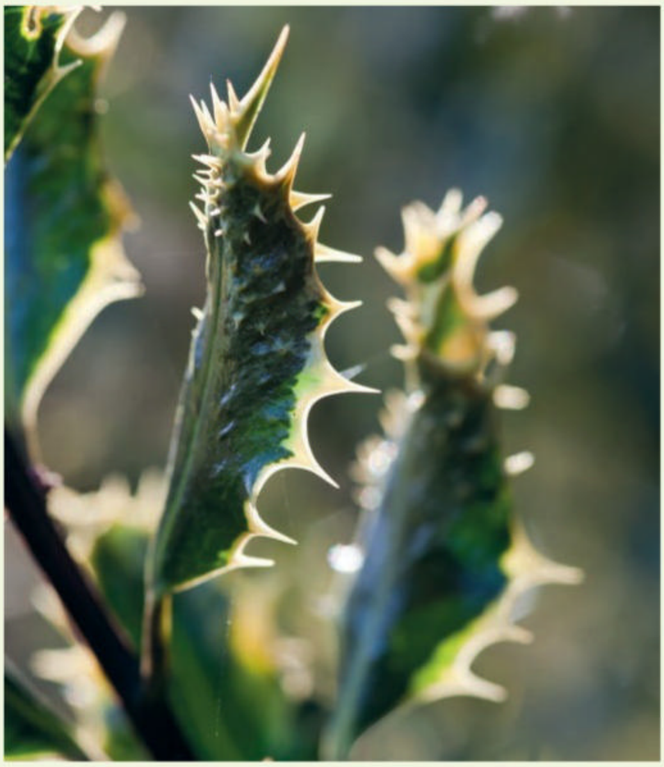
Larch Cottage Nurseries
www.larchcottage.co.uk

Bluebell Arboretum and Nursery
www.bluebellnursery.com

Top 5 hollies


© Phillipa Gibson RHS

***Ilex aquifolium* 'Handsworth New Silver'**
Has a lovely silvery white margin to the leaf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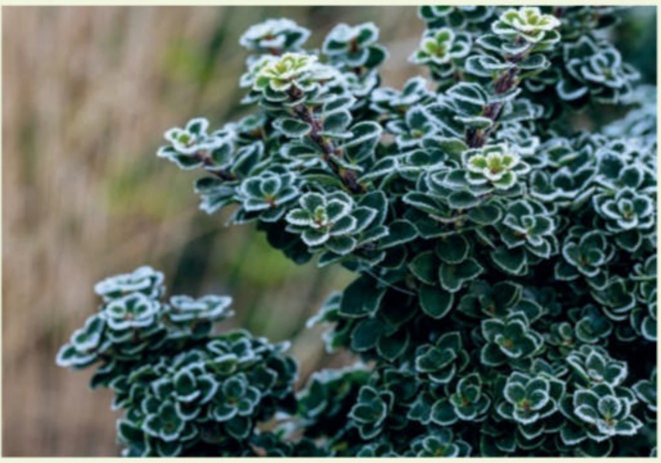
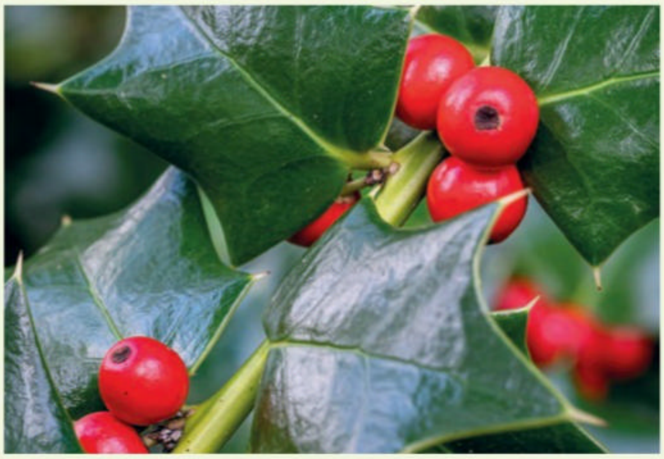
***Ilex aquifolium* 'Ferox Argentea'**
Also known as the hedgehog holly due to its extremely prickly, almost distorted leaves.


© Jason Ingram RHS

***Ilex crenata* 'Dwarf Pagoda'**
A low-growing variety that's good for the front of the border where it can resemble a quirky piece of bonsai.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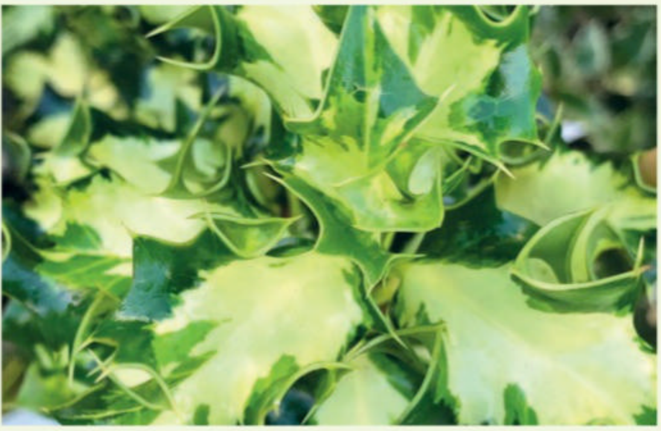
***Ilex* 'Good Taste'**
Slightly angular leaves and lovely red berries. A good foil for other plants.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***Ilex aquifolium* 'Silver Milkmaid'**
Glossy leaves with a silvery edging and a gold centre rib. It has lovely red berries.

THE NATURAL FORAGER'S GARDEN

With expert broadcaster, author and long-standing *AG* columnist, **Anne Swithinbank**

How to grow fruit and nuts to suit your plot

Anne with her colony of summer-fruiting raspberries, all suckers from one original plant. They cropped well for several years but last year's drought has sent them downhill in search of moisture

All images unless otherwise credited: John Swithinbank

Anne shares tips for growing sweet chestnuts and raspberries, and gives three cheers for chicory!

This autumn was one of great abundance and, following a long, hot summer with plenty of sunshine, nuts from sweet chestnuts reached a good size. We foraged widely and although roasting them on an open fire is traditional, we tend to slit the skins to let steam out, bake them in the oven and use most as garnishes for soft, pureed soups of parsnip or squash.

Even in a good year, nuts from trees in the UK are usually smaller than the whoppers in shops. We are at the cooler northern edge of where the trees like to grow and commercially, cultivars bearing larger nuts are used. Chestnuts are grown commercially here, mainly in the south of England, but most are imported from the sunnier climes of Italy, Spain or France. Some might originate from China, where 80% of the world's chestnuts are grown. These lovely, though potentially large, trees are worth considering and there are ways to curb their size.

Allowing my raspberries to wander where they will has had a somewhat predictable downside, resulting in their original bed emptying out, while the one next to it has been invaded by healthy new canes. This 'permissive parenting' of raspberries originated when we had trouble establishing new canes in the lower parts of the kitchen garden where soil (even when raised slightly) was too wet during winter. Set in sensible rows and attached to wires, they gradually died away and our current colony evolved from one plant of 'Tulameen'.

This was set in an uphill bed, where numerous suckers prospered and fruited well for several years until last summer's drought sent them off in search of moisture. Obviously they don't get up and walk like mythical mandrakes, but move slowly underground by sending their horizontal subterranean stems, known as stolons, in the direction they feel would suit them best. Maybe a wet winter will turn them around and send them back.

Step by step How to grow sweet chestnuts

Sweet chestnut trees can grow large, but there are ways of regulating their size to suit your garden

There is often confusion between sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) and unrelated horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) whose nuts or conkers are inedible. Having arrived here during the 1600s, horse chestnuts are a newcomer compared with sweet chestnuts that have been resident since Roman times. Sweet chestnuts are the trees of my childhood, spent in Lesnes Abbey Woods, Belvedere, where coppicing had rendered the trunk bases of older trees wide and gnarled. The bark of mature, uncoppiced trees tends to grow in impressive spirals.

Their nuts are best gathered fully mature after a frost or two and will keep well in a fridge. We had a tree here for some years, and knowing it could reach 18m (60ft) high, I pollarded it one winter at 1.5m (5ft). Several branches grew and having matured for three to four years, nuts were produced.

Above: **Sweet chestnuts are a delicious autumn treat grown in the UK since Roman times**

This was lucky, as most chestnuts are not self-fertile but are pollinated by wind as well as insects, and we do have trees nearby. Rather than pollarding again after several years, we thinned out the branches of our tree, so there were always some mature enough to fruit. When trees are coppiced by cutting them close to the ground, this is known as selective coppicing, or coppicing with standards.

Plan now for a late winter or spring planting in a sunny position in well-draining soil. A slightly acidic or neutral soil is best, but I have gathered large nuts from healthy trees growing in a good depth of topsoil over chalk.

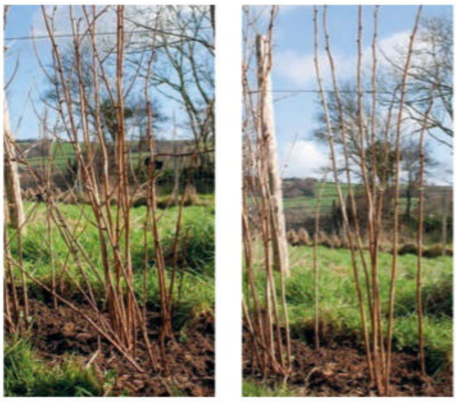
Try these... Reliable sweet chestnut varieties

'Marigoule'
A number one choice where there's room for only one tree, as it is a cultivar that's smaller than the basic species, partially self-fertile and a good pollinator. The nuts are large and early to mature, with cases splitting easily as they fall. Tolerates damp soil well. *www.walnuttrees.co.uk*

'Marron de Lyon'
This variety is a reliable fruiter and produces large, early-season nuts in September and October. This one will require a pollinator, such as 'Marigoule'. *www.chrisbowers.co.uk*

'Belle Epine'
As well as delivering a good crop of dark chestnuts, this French cultivar is partially self-fertile and also a good pollinator for 'Marron de Lyon'. The nuts mature mid to late season, around October. *www.rvroger.co.uk*

Anne had a great harvest last summer from her raspberries and froze many of them



Above: **Left, a traditional, well-established row of summer raspberries unpruned and, right, one plant pruned, thinned out and with canes tied in**

What now with my raspberries?

I've rather enjoyed growing raspberries 'freestyle' and it goes to show that you can still have plenty of berries without bothering with traditional supports - though I did have to put in a few bamboo canes at fruiting time to tie in and support the taller stems. These also support the mesh secured with pegs and bricks that protects the ripening berries from birds. This is a system that fits well with an informal, forest-style kitchen garden.

I'm so fond of raspberries, I'm inclined to keep what's left of the free-roaming plants, even though some of the new canes are only 30cm (12in) tall when they should be more like 1.5m (5ft). With weeding, mulching and feeding in late winter, they should yield something. Meanwhile, in an empty 1.2m (4ft) wide bed on the same upward side of the garden, I'll plant a more traditional row, again with a summer-fruiting cultivar. Many gardeners swear by autumn-fruiting kinds, saying they are easier and fruit over a longer period. In my garden, I found the late berries to be prone to rotting quickly on the canes.

Above: **Anne is giving a young raspberry plant a mulch over the roots but away from the stem. Her drought-stricken plants will have similar treatment soon**

Their treatment is different, as summer fruiting canes are pruned to the ground after they've finished fruiting, leaving behind the new canes that will crop next year. In rows, these are generally thinned and tied in. Free-style, I usually thin them out in their colony. Autumn-fruiting raspberries have all their canes cut to the ground in late winter and the new growth they make in spring rises up to fruit in autumn. It is possible with good care to double-crop your autumn fruiters by retaining six to eight strong canes per 1m (3ft), pruning away their fruited tops and reducing all others to the ground. After the semi-pruned canes have fruited in summer, these are cut to the ground, leaving the new canes that rose in spring to crop in autumn.

Chicory catch-up

There's a lot going on in our garden, so I'd rather forgotten about the chicory roots I lifted, trimmed, potted and covered just a few weeks ago. It was so exciting to lift the doubled upturned pots (rotated slightly so their drainage holes were covered) to reveal the bright lime green 'chicons' within.

These are wild chicory *(Chicorium intybus*) rather than Witloof types, though the same method was used. Trying a leaf, it was less bitter, less chewy and more crunchy than the normal, unforced leaf. They'll be added to the next salad of mixed but more mellow leaves, perhaps with pears, walnuts and a good dressing.

Above: **After only two weeks, the forced common chicory had sprouted pale, palatable leaves**

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10 signs of life in your wonderful winter garden

Mike Palmer explains how despite its quiet, slumbering appearance, there's lots happening in our outside spaces during the colder, darker months

All images unless otherwise credited: Mike Palmer

> **"Shhhh, shhhh, it's nice and quiet, Shhhh, shhhh, but soon again, Starts another big riot"**
>
> **Björk – It's Oh So Quiet**

I never had experimental art pop singer Björk down as an observer of gardens, but the lyrics of her hit *It's Oh So Quiet* accurately sum up the somewhat deceptive appearance of our winter gardens, which need sleep in much the same way as weary gardeners do. They also need to recharge, repair and to prepare for the forthcoming season. But how do gardens know it's winter?

From the summer solstice (around June 21), days become almost imperceptibly shorter and nights lengthen. For many plants, the change in day length is the main trigger, recognised by microscopic photoreceptors in their leaves. The receptors send signals to the plant which changes hormone production levels and slowly but surely induces dormancy – clever stuff, eh?

Even with the warmer seasons brought about by climate change, cooler temperatures eventually prevail, reinforcing natural slowing down and slumber. As temperatures dip below

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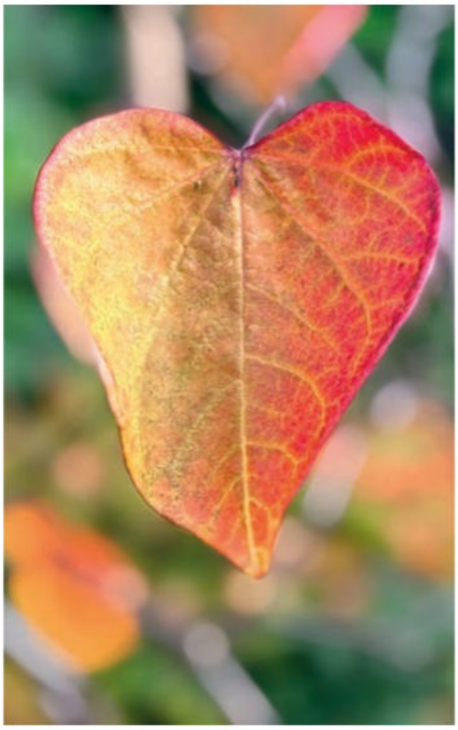
Our winter gardens look 'oh so quiet' and still, but in fact there's lots of life still going on if you know where to look



Above: In some plants, leaves sense the change in day length through tiny receptors

Above: Mike likens the dormancy of a winter garden to our own revitalising, replenishing sleep

10°C (50°F), the metabolic activity of many plants stalls, and along with it the production of new leaves and shoots. Then, as temperatures tumble to below 5°C (41°F), most plant growth stops altogether. A similar process in reverse heralds the arrival of spring and the recommencement of excitable new growth. Isn't Mother Nature incredible?

But much like us when we sleep, looks can be very deceptive. A garden slumbering in winter, including plants, soil and some wildlife, has many parallels to human sleep. Although seemingly lifeless as we fall into the welcoming arms of Morpheus under the quilted cover of darkness, we are conserving energy, re-energising, regulating hormone production and repairing ourselves ahead of that wretched alarm clock squawking in the new day at too early o'clock.

Our gardens are much the same, with a hive of largely unseen activity playing out beneath the soil in preparation for the much anticipated and lauded riot of springtime.

Above: Despite the cold, our soil still teems with microscopic life through winter

2 examples of soil life activity

'*In the bleak midwinter..., earth stood hard as iron..., snow had fallen snow on snow*' go the lyrics of the popular Christmas carol. And yet, despite the vagaries of the coldest winter, the soil is humming with life and a thick layer of snow is most welcome, insulating the soil and keeping it a degree or two warmer.

Microbial activity

Despite the cold, micro-organisms including bacteria and fungi - our soil champions - keep on working, albeit at a slightly slower pace. They continue breaking down fallen leaves and dead plant material, releasing nutrients into the soil and improving soil structure to promote lush plant growth as the new season dawns.

Let's hear it for the worms

A huge 'shout out' to earthworms, beetle larvae, springtails and scores of other invertebrates with a work ethic like no other. Heading down to lower levels when the surface freezes, they all aerate the soil and help to maintain a healthy structure that allows easier access for plant roots searching for food and water.

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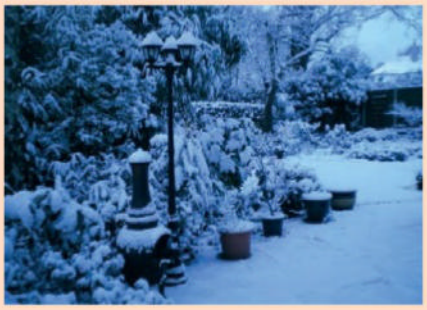
Above: Heading down to deeper levels in winter, earthworms and other invertebrates continue to aerate the soil

4 ways perennials deal with winter

When we cut down faded and forlorn perennials, it signals the end of another glorious season. It seems so final, as the straw-like top growth is consigned to the compost heap, leaving desolate, dark borders, hardened by fierce frosts, drifts of snow, vicious winds and driving rain. But beneath the surface of the soil, things are quietly stirring:

Above: Faded perennials might be bound for the compost bin, but there's still lots of activity beneath the soil



Above: Hidden beneath a mantle of snow and frost, bulbs, corms and tubers store the essential sugars and nutrients that were released by fading leaves and will power springtime growth

Roots, bulbs and tubers

Out of sight and seemingly out of mind, let's spare a moment to applaud roots, bulbs and tubers, the powerhouses of plants hidden away beneath the soil's surface. During winter, these vital plant components are busy storing the essential sugars and nutrients that have been pulled down from the fading foliage to power new growth in spring - that's why it's so important not to cut back foliage too soon.

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Above: Hellebores, alongside other plants, return in all their splendour despite being hit by cold weather, thanks to proteins that act like horticultuural antifreeze

Horticultural antifreeze

Have you ever wondered how evergreen plants survive the winter and its often freezing temperatures? In winter, some plants produce proteins that act like antifreeze, preventing damage to plant cells in periods of cold weather.

If you grow hellebores, sedums or geraniums, you'll have seen their seemingly distressed foliage or lifeless forms flopped across frost-gilded borders, only to rise phoenix-like later during the day as a watery sunshine gently warms and revives their leaves.

Root growth

With temperatures below the soil slightly warmer than those above, root growth continues. If the soil itself isn't frozen, roots still seek out nutrients and water sources to aid plant growth in the new season.

Bud formation

Take a woolly-hatted stroll around a winter garden and you'll see the expectant buds of flowers and foliage swelling each day along leaf stems and within leaf axils. For me, buds are the most delightfully quiet pledge that spring is coming.

Above: Even in the depth of winter, buds are forming and swell daily

4 wonderful wildlife in winter

Tucked away in the hollow stems of perennials, nestling under a blanket of fallen leaves, or buried in the muddy detritus at the bottom of the pond, our garden wildlife assumes a quieter life in winter.

Birds

It wouldn't be Christmas without a cheeky robin, its tiny black eye cocked down towards the soil scavenging for insects. While some birds flock to warmer climes (how sensible!), more resilient species spend the winter months in our gardens. They'll pick the last of the berries and forage for seeds and insects with shorter bursts of activity to save energy.

Above: **Many insects overwinter in hollow stems, or perhaps a well-positioned bug hotel**

Above: **Look out for blackbirds, robins and other resilient birds scavenging for winter treats. Don't forget to provide them with fresh food and water.**

Insects

Many insects, including ladybirds, bees and moths, overwinter in dormant stages, as eggs, larvae or pupae beneath the soil and in plant stems or leaf litter.

Mammals

Hedgehogs bury themselves under piles of leaves, their body temperature dropping and metabolism slowing to survive until spring. Mice and voles tuck themselves away in underground burrows foraging for seeds and plant roots.

Above: **Hedgehogs buried under piles of leaves lower their metabolism to get through the vagaries of our winter weather**

Above: **Frogs, toads and newts head towards the muddy bottoms of ponds to escape extreme winter temperatures**

The frog chorus

Frogs, toads and newts bury themselves in the muddy detritus at the bottom of ponds or in compost heaps. They enter a hibernation-like state called brumation, where their metabolic rate drops dramatically, allowing them to survive for weeks, even months, without eating.

So, all quiet in the winter garden? Probably not!

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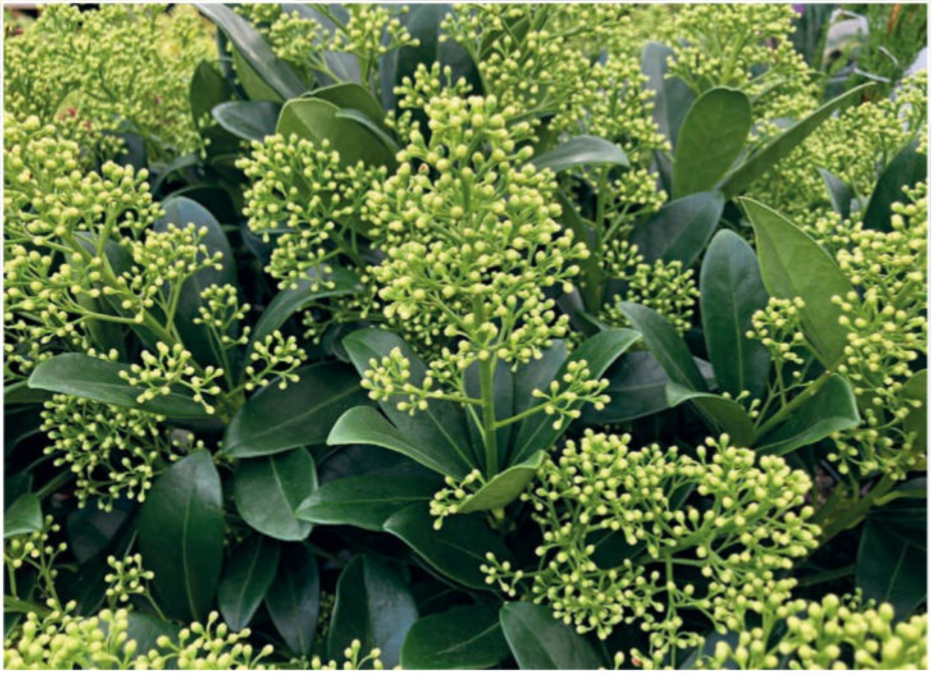
9 wonderful white plants for winter

Liz Zorab chooses some cool customers for upbeat container planting

Previously I have looked at white and cream flowers for summer and autumn, so let's look at some of the snowy-coloured plants that are in bloom or provide a good display in winter. I've selected plants that usually respond well to growing in containers, which you can move close to your door to enjoy on even the darkest, wettest and coldest days as you dash past to reach the warmth of your home.

Single-colour displays add a sense of calm and cohesion and white will lift a dull corner beautifully. Or, if you want to make one plant in particular stand out in a display, surround it with white or pale cream flowers and light foliage to really help it pop.



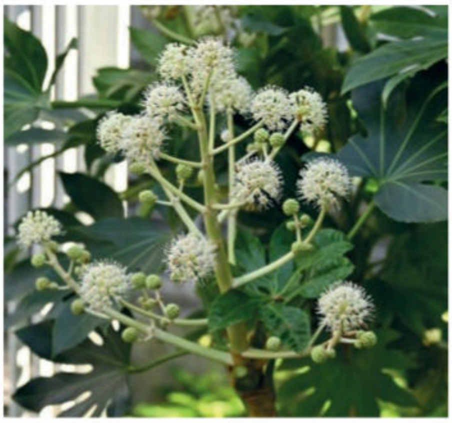
© Liz Zorab

Above: The glorious, hopeful buds of *Skimmia japonica* 'Finchy' transform into a a mass of tiny white flowers in March and April

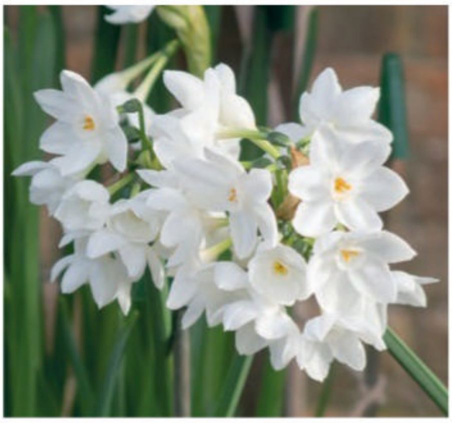
Skimmia japonica 'Finchy'

Skimmias are evergreen plants that prefer to grow in shade or partial shade. 'Finchy' is a bushy shrub with dark, glossy leaves. Flower heads form during autumn and I think the unopened buds are delightfully eye-catching at a time when so many plants are dying back for the winter.

The buds remain throughout the winter and open in March and April. The tiny white flowers release their sweet scent, making this specimen ideal for planting near the door and in seasonal containers, which can be moved closer during the cooler months. This is a male variety, so won't produce berries, but will help with pollination of nearby skimmias. Height and spread 60 to 80cm (2 to 2ft 8in). Grow in acid or neutral soil or peat-free compost. It is hardy throughout most of the UK and Ireland.



Above: The gorgeous globe-shaped flowers of *Fatsia japonica* 'Murakumo-nishiki'



Above: The pretty white petals of paper-white daffodils are often grown inside the home over winter

Fatsia japonica 'Murakumo-nishiki'

You will find this in most garden centres labelled *Fatsia* 'Camouflage' and right now it is covered with globe-shaped flower heads with tiny white flowers that have white petals and a cream centre. By spring, these will have become black, inedible berries.

This hardy, evergreen and variegated foliage is green and gold, with splashes of darker green. Over time, the plant will need a very large container or to be grown in the ground. Mature height and spread 200cm (6ft 6in). However, younger plants are ideal for container displays for several years. Grow in a sheltered position, in partial shade. It prefers east or west-facing gardens and moist but well-drained soil or compost

Narcissus papyraceus

Most commonly known as the paper-white daffodil, the flowers of this perennial bulb are highly fragrant and often grown in containers inside the home. The strap-like leaves are blue-green and the flowers grow in clusters of up to 10 flowers on each stem. Height 35cm (14in).

Hardy throughout warmer parts of the UK and Ireland, grow in a sheltered position in a west or south-facing spot, in full sun or partial shade. They prefer soil that is constantly moist during the growing season, but not waterlogged. Stand the container on small feet to raise it off the ground to ensure good drainage.

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Totally dreamy and delicate-looking, *Cyclamen coum* can stand firm for much of winter, just ensure good drainage as they don't like sitting in soggy soil

Cyclamen coum subsp. _coum_ f. _pallidum_ 'Album'
Cyclamen have delicate-looking blooms, but don't be fooled by their appearance! *Cyclamen coum* are tough little plants and will form a mat of leaves that spreads over time. Make sure that you have bought hardy cyclamen as those sold for indoor growth will not survive our winters.

Height 8 to 20cm (3 to 8in) and spread 10 to 20cm (4 to 8in), they are available in a variety of colours from white to dark red, and most shades between. *Cyclamen coum* subsp. *coum* f. *pallidum* 'Album' has white flowers that often have a purple mark at the base of each petal. Flowers are held on pink-brown or purple stems adding even more interest to your winter display.

Helleborus x _hybridus_ 'Double Ellen White'
Hellebores grow in a wide range of colours and forms and many cross-pollinate freely. I spotted this plant at Aberglasney Gardens in Carmarthenshire and was instantly drawn to it. Multiple layers of sepals protect the tiny tubular petals at the centre, forming a slightly shaggy-looking flower.

'Double Ellen White' is semi-evergreen, meaning that it is evergreen except during severe winters. Grow in neutral to alkaline peat-free soil or compost. Provide a sheltered spot in full sun or partial shade and it will continue to produce flowers throughout the cooler months. Height and spread 35cm (14in).

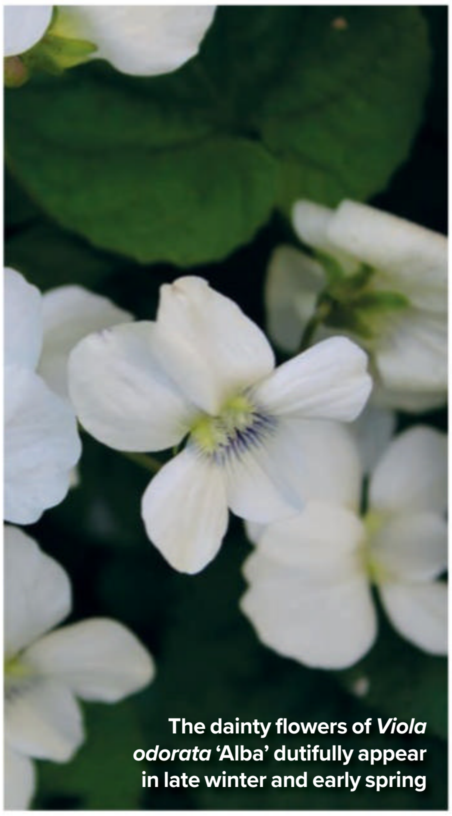
Viola odorata 'Alba'
White sweet violets have long been one of my favourite low-growing plants. The dainty flowers appear in late winter and very early spring, nestled among and also held above the heart-shaped leaves.

The whole plant reaches just 10 to 15cm (4 to 6in) in height and spread. Grow in any type of soil, in a sheltered spot in partial shade. If you can find a spot with some winter sun, but that is more shaded during summer, the plants should thrive. You can propagate by division, but as they will self-seed readily, it is usually easier to allow them to increase in number naturally. Hardy throughout the UK, Ireland and northern Europe.

▶

© Liz Zorab

Above: *Helleborus* x *hybridus* 'Double Ellen White' is semi-evergreen and slightly shaggy-looking, in a good way


The dainty flowers of *Viola odorata* 'Alba' dutifully appear in late winter and early spring

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The wonderful white or cream leaf variation of ornamental brassica

Ornamental brassica

These decorative cabbages are available in a range of colours and leaf shapes. Choose one with white or cream variegation to add an intense splash of colour to a container. They prefer fertile soil or compost that does not become waterlogged.

Grow in partial shade for the strongest colour in the leaves, but they will grow in full sun too. Hardy throughout the UK and Ireland, they grow to 40cm (16in) in height, with a spread of 30cm (12in).

Hedera helix 'Variegata'

English ivy is usually grown as a climber or used as groundcover, and in a smaller garden it can become a bit of a thug. However, in containers it works well as a trailing plant that will tumble over the sides of the pot or tub, softening the edges and adding another dimension to the display. The leaves of these evergreen plants have white or cream edges and markings.

Easy to propagate from cuttings, or by layering, the stems produce roots when they touch the soil or compost. Simply remove a rooted section and transfer to a new container or site in your garden.

Galanthus nivalis

Snowdrops are usually the first bulbs to flower from mid to late winter. There are so many varieties to choose from and I relish the first sighting of them early in the year. I think they are an ideal addition to a winter container.

The common snowdrop grows to 15cm (6in) in height and each bulb produces one flower that hangs down and sways in the breeze. Each fragrant flower has green markings on the inner segments.

Snowdrops can be purchased in pots or 'in the green', in other words, after they have flowered. Prepare for next winter's displays by lifting and dividing existing clumps and placing individual plants in pots so that they're ready to add nearer the time.

Above: Grow *Hedera helix* 'Variegata' in containers to keep it contained and enjoy its attractive markings

Above: Snowdrops lend themselves really well to winter container planting and can be purchased in pots now or 'in the green' later on

Rosie's retro revival

Mahonias deserve a place in our gardens as they offer striking architectural foliage and butter-yellow, honey-scented flowers when most other plants have gone quiet for winter

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How to grow magnificent mahonias

Rosie Irving shares her love for this pretty, scented evergreen

Remember mahonias, those spiky evergreens often found lurking at the back of your grandparents' garden, or inappropriately planted by the edge of a path, waiting 'to attack' as you unsuspectingly round a corner? Well, I'm about to weave some mahonia magic around you and, in the process, explain why they're coming back in fashion and totally deserving of their revival.

At a time of the year when colour fades and gardens feel bare, mahonias deliver drama. Their bold, architectural leaves, honey-scented, lemon-yellow flowers and jewel-like berries bring form and function to a space when many herbaceous perennials and deciduous shrubs have either died down or faded into the background.

One reason they're coming back into fashion is because many of us gardeners want biodiversity and resilience from our plants as well as beauty, and mahonia offers all three of these qualities.

Some produce deep red-orange buds, others have leaves that turn rich shades of red during the winter months when colour is most needed.

History of mahonia

Mahonia is native to North and Central America and parts of Asia. It was

Mahonia fan Rosie can't get enough of these eye-catching and biodiverse winter wonders

All images unless otherwise credited: Rosie Irving

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Above: The rich red winter leaves of *M. bealei*

Above: *M. nitens* 'Cabaret' has gorgeous red-orange buds

first introduced to the UK in 1823 by American plant hunters Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who discovered it growing all over the Rockies. They gave seeds to nurseryman Bernard McMahon, an Irishman who'd emigrated to America in search of greater opportunities. He was a brilliant seed sower and the shrub was eventually called 'mahonia' in his honour.

Plant collecting was a hazardous occupation and men on this trip were frequently overcome by sickness and fevers. Some were fortunate enough to be successfully treated by native Americans in structures known as 'sweat lodges'.

These were dome-shaped buildings traditionally used for cleansing and communing with the spirits. Diary extracts from one expedition record that one of the party who'd suffered severe back spasms for three weeks and could hardly walk was treated by this method and, by morning, had completely recovered!

How to grow

- Mahonia is a remarkably easy shrub to grow.
- It grows happily in partially shaded spots. Some, such as *M. japonica*, grow well in full shade.
- It loves fertile, moist, well-drained soil.
- Water regularly during the first year of planting. Once settled, mahonias are remarkably drought-tolerant.
- Very little pruning is needed, other than a light trim immediately after flowering to help retain the plant's shape.
- A mulch of leaf mould or well-rotted compost, applied around the base of the plant in spring, helps retain moisture and improves soil structure.

Above: The delightfully scented, upright flower clusters of *M. oiwakensis subsp. lomariifolia*

Reasons to love mahonia – fragrance, foliage and form

We all need stalwarts in our lives, loyal, reliable and hard-working, and the same goes for our choice of garden plants. If all our horticultural choices were high maintenance, what a chore that would be, we'd never be able to relax!

Fortunately, mahonias are the epitome of easy-going evergreen shrubs, adding structure as well as winter interest, with attractive lemon-yellow flowers wafting a sweet scent around the garden, bringing cheer to the darkest of winter days.

© David Jewell

Above: Mahonia fan Rosie can't get enough of these eye-catching and biodiverse winter wonders

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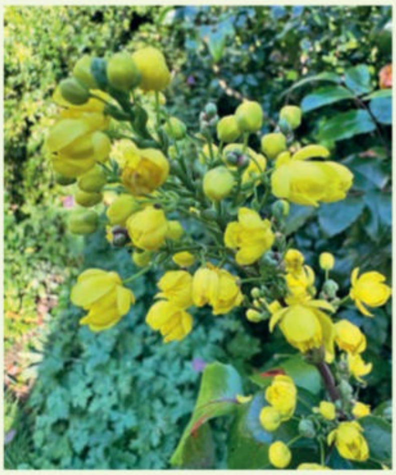
Above: Also known as 'Oregon grape', mahonia produces berries which have been used traditionally by Native Americans as dyes and flavouring

Did you know

The plant's common name 'Oregon grape' refers to the region of America where the shrub was discovered and the berries it produces after flowering, which look like bunches of grapes.

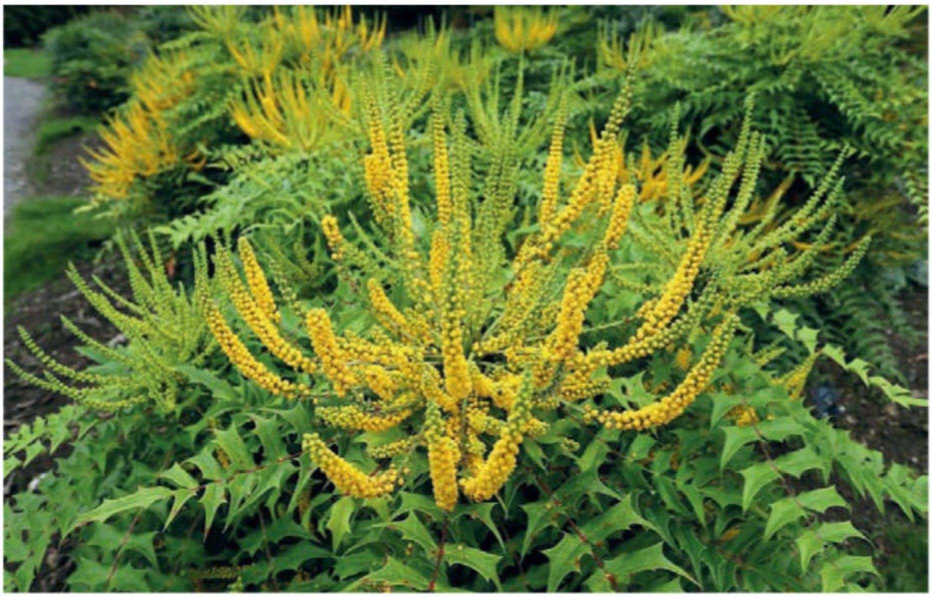
Native Americans traditionally used these berries to flavour drinks and make purple dye to colour fabric and baskets.

The sweet scent of mahonia flowers is often compared to that of lily of the valley (*Convallaria majalis*), which can be infused in a sugar or sugar-substitute syrup to make cordials, but please check with a professional that you've collected berries and/or flowers from the correct plant before eating or imbibing.



Above: *Mahonia aquifolium* flowers have a lovely scent which is often compared to lily of the valley

Mahonia such as this *M. huiliensis* are low-maintenance plants to grow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Good plant companions

Half the battle with growing mahonia is what to plant with them to create a cohesive grouping that provides year-round interest.

Spring flowering bulbs, like *Anemone nemorosa*, winter aconites and snowdrops, will transform areas around mahonia into carpets of early, seasonal colour.

Adding evergreen plants like ferns such as *Polystichum setiferum* and red-tinged, silvery-green, strap-leaved *Astelia* 'Red Shadow', along with the beautiful, red-stemmed, starry, white-flowered *Gillenia trifoliata*, will draw the eye up gradually to taller evergreen plants of interest, such as *Fatsia japonica*, and the more uncommon, but strikingly beautiful, Taiwanese schefflera, known botanically as *Heptapleurum taiwanianum*.

Complete the group with dogwoods with coloured stems for fabulous winter interest, and the stage is set for a spectacular seasonal performance.

Above: Mahonia favours part shade so growing by other trees such as this birch can work well

Did you know

- Mahonia is a true wildlife magnet, offering year-round value to garden ecosystems, especially at this time of year.

- Its clusters of winter flowers provide a much-needed source of nectar for late-season bees and other pollinators, when little else is flowering in the garden.

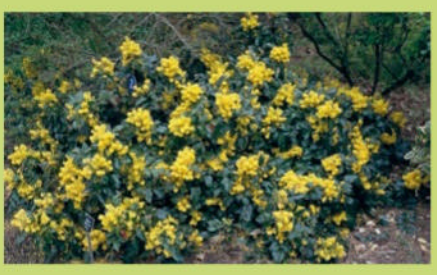
- The glossy dark blue-black berries that follow the flowers provide a feast for blackbirds and thrushes and the plant's dense, spiny leaves create excellent shelter and nesting sites for a wide range of birds.

- Planting a mahonia can help support a thriving web of wildlife during the colder months of the year and beyond.

Above: A male blackbird about to enjoy some mahonia berries

Five of the best

M. aquifolium 'Apollo'

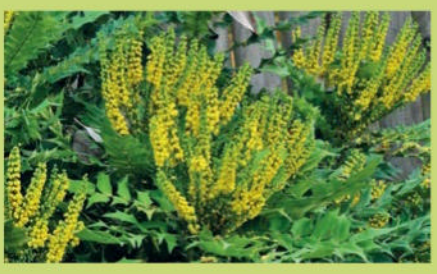


© Ashwood Nurseries

Height and spread: 100cm (3.3ft) by 150cm (4ft 11in)

A compact cultivar, ideal for the smaller garden. Clusters of scented, yellow flowers appear between March and April and its leaves turn shades of deep red and purple over the winter months.

M. x media 'Winter Sun'

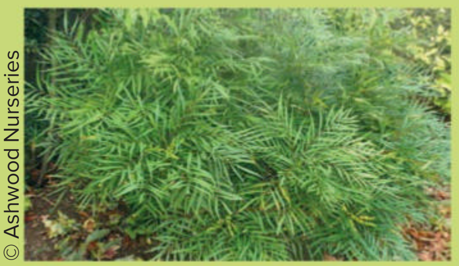


© Ashwood Nurseries

Height and spread: 400cm (13ft)

A great plant for shadier spots often seen in large gardens and municipal sites. It's impactful, easy to maintain and extremely hardy. Clusters of upright, sweetly scented, yellow flowers appear from November until early spring.

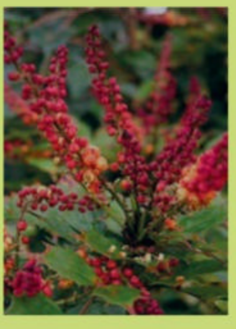
M. eurybracteata subsp. ganpinensis 'Soft Caress'



© Ashwood Nurseries

Height and spread: 100cm (3.3ft)

If you'd prefer something less spiky, then this is the cultivar for you. It's compact and evergreen with fern-like, non-prickly leaves and pretty lemon-yellow flowers, produced from October to December.



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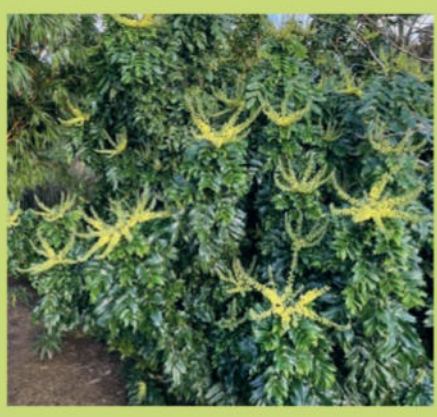
M. nitens 'Cabaret'

Height and spread: 120cm (3ft 11in) by 80cm (2ft 7in)

Another compact cultivar flowering from late summer until November, with flower buds that are, unusually for a mahonia, bright orange-red.

M. 'Pan's Peculiar'



© Nick Macer Pan-Global Plants

Height and spread 300cm (9ft 10in) by 400cm (13ft)

My wild-card pick! Happy in full sun as well as shade, it forms hummocks of short, shiny leaves that start a rich, maroon colour before changing to shiny deep green. Soft yellow, scented flowers appear all over the mature plant in a starfish shape.

There really are many beautiful species and hybrids to choose from and so maybe it's high time to start a mahonia revival with us *Amateur Gardening* readers setting the trend!

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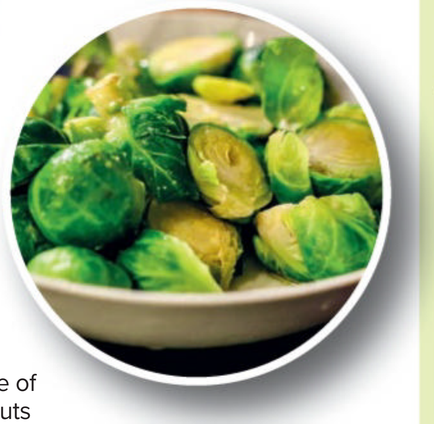
Gardening's king of trivia and brain-teasers, **Graham Clarke**

I'm a sproutaholic!



I need to find a group of like-minded individuals, where we meet and sit in a circle. And when it comes to my turn, I stand and say: "My name is Graham, and I am a sproutaholic." You see, Brussels sprouts are, without question, my favourite vegetable. I could eat platefuls of them. However, a large percentage of the population only eat sprouts at Christmas, out of a sense of duty. Why are these vegetables so widely disliked?

- **Reason 1:** In 2011, a study found that sprouts contain a chemical which tastes bitter to people who have a variation of a certain gene. Around half the world's population have this variant. The lucky half (without the variant) don't taste the bitterness usually associated with sprouts, and therefore find them much more palatable.
- **Reason 2:** Sprouts are often over-boiled, resulting in a yellowish mush. Ideally, bring them to the boil, and then simmer them for seven to 12 minutes. For me, they are past their best if you can cut them with a wooden spoon!

Why the Christmas connection?

In Victorian times, sprouts were the only green vegetable that could withstand a normal, cold winter – and which could be harvested when there was snow on the ground. By Christmas, autumn cauliflowers had finished, and cabbages were regarded as boring and not offering much in the way of taste; in those days, broccoli hadn't yet made its way into our vegetable lexicon. So, for a big meal (such as Christmas dinner), sprouts became a significant part.

Wow! I didn't know that!

- If you put 'Belgium, law, sprouts' into a Google search, you will read that a 'quirk' in Belgian law states that citizens may legally throw Brussels sprouts at tourists. Don't be fooled...it is a joke that has been repeated as 'fact' hundreds of times across the internet.
- Captain Cook made his crew eat sprouts to combat scurvy.
- The average number of calories contained in one sprout is... eight!

This fortnight in gardening history

14 Dec 1843 John Claudius Loudon died. A Scottish botanist, writer and landscape gardener, he was the first to use the term 'arboretum' for a collection of trees.
17 Dec 1947 Charles Hurst died. A Cambridge geneticist specialising in eye colour genetics and animal coat colouration, he was also most famously a hybridiser of orchids and roses.
25 Dec 1800 The first Christmas tree in Britain was erected at Queen's Lodge, Windsor, by Queen Charlotte.

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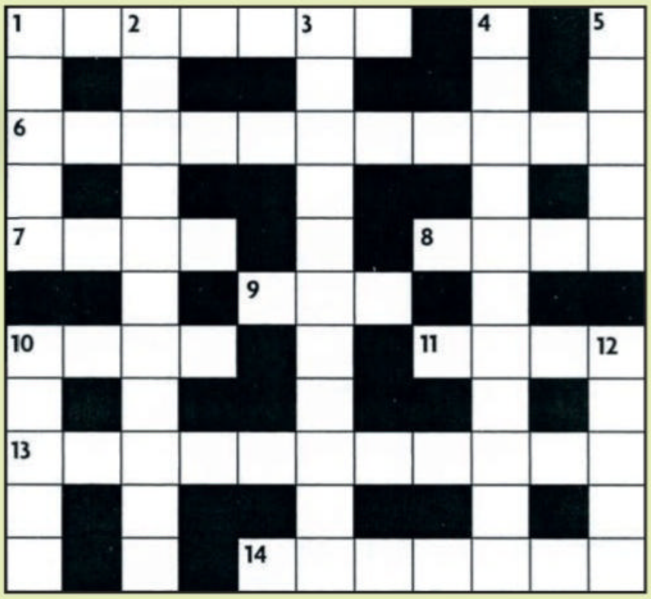
Crossword... *just for fun!*



ACROSS
1 A lawn covered by fallen autumn leaves could be said to be this! (7)
6 The bottle brush genus (11)
7 On 25 December 1800, the first Christmas _____ was erected in Britain (4)
8 Twig or small branch on a tree that carries fruits – as in spurge (4)
9 One of the most popular Christmas films is ____ (2003) starring Will Ferrell (3)
10 Defence force, as in *Helenium* 'Red _____' and *Fuchsia* '_____ Nurse' (4)
11 *Vigna radiata*, or _____ bean, produces sprouted seeds widely used in stir fries (4)
13 Genus of perennials, including the king's spear, with thick, fleshy roots (11)
14 Last summer many of us experienced this lack of water (7)

DOWN
1 A lawn that has not been mowed could be said to be this! (5)
2 Common name for the tree *Acer saccharinum* (6,5)
3 Rod, petals or a tried and trusted way of making payment to a named person! (6,5) (anag)
4 Cutting off a large tree branch, it could be said! (4,7)
5 Passenger ship placed in the bottom of a garden pond – to hold the water in! (5)
10 Succulent with the common name of century plant (5)
12 *Allium ampeloprasum* is the ______-headed garlic, whilst the sycamore tree (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) is also known as the ______ maple (5)

ANSWERS TO CROSSWORD ABOVE

ACROSS 1 Unswept 6 Callistemon 7 Tree 8 Spur 9 Elf 10 Army 11 Mung 13 Asphodeline 14 Drought **DOWN** 1 Uncut 2 Silver maple 3 Postal order 4 Limb pruning 5 Liner 10 Agave 12 Great

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Snowdrops are a symbol of hope and resilience during the darker days of winter and can be planted up and brought indoors as a delicate, joyful arrangement

How to enjoy the delicate beauty of snowdrops

Ellen Mary explains how these winter wonders are a sign of resilience and hope, whether grown in the garden or brought inside

December in the garden is a month of stillness and subtle winter beauty. To me it feels like the landscape has moved into a gentle meditation, inviting us to observe the smaller details. Enjoy this time to step outside into crisp air, breathe deeply, and feel grounded.

The wellness benefits of winter gardening can be underestimated, but even just a few moments outside now can lift the spirits and give some respite from the festive hustle and bustle. Some of the most loved flowers of winter will soon be popping up, bringing hope and joy during the quieter season.

Snowdrops (*Galanthus spp*) are seen as a symbol of renewal and optimism. Even when the soil is frozen and the garden bare, they still glisten across the landscape and remind us that spring is on the way.

They are surrounded by folklore. Legends include how an angel breathed warmth onto a snowflake to create a snowdrop after taking pity on the first woman on Earth who was weeping after being expelled from paradise into a world of endless snow and cold. This transformed into the first snowdrop as a reminder that even the hardest times can carry the promise of new beginnings. What a lovely thought to remember - after all, snowdrops do appear just when we are in the darkest days of the year.

All images unless otherwise credited: Shutterstock

Tips for snowdrop care

Once established, snowdrops are easy to care for. Here's how to look after them:

1. **Moisture:** Snowdrops prefer moist but not waterlogged soil, which is why woodland conditions suit them well. To feed the soil and retain moisture, add some well-rotted organic matter each year.
2. **Light:** Dappled shade is ideal, especially underneath deciduous trees and shrubs. Snowdrops flower before many trees spring into leaf, so benefit from winter sunlight and then enjoy shade from emerging foliage as they die back.
3. **After flowering:** Leave the foliage until it turns yellow naturally, as this helps to feed the bulbs for the following year.

Above: Snowdrops can be brought indoors and displayed in quirky containers, such as old cups

How to propagate snowdrops

1. **Division:** After flowering, when the leaves are still green and firm, lift a clump gently with a fork. Separate into smaller clumps with at least three bulbs and replant straightaway at the same depth, where you want them to grow.
2. **Seed:** It's slow, but snowdrops can grow from seed by allowing seedpods to mature after flowering and letting them disperse naturally. Seedlings might take years to flower, but it is nature doing what it does best, naturally.
3. **Naturalising:** Don't be too quick to rake up leaves in autumn and winter. If you leave leaf litter under trees and avoid disturbing the areas where snowdrops are growing, this will provide a similar habitat to woodland and will support self seeding.

How to grow snowdrops

Snowdrops can be grown either from bulbs or from plants already in growth called 'in the green'. I have tried unsuccessfully to grow from bulbs because they are often quickly found by hungry mice or squirrels where I live! So, I tend to grow from plants 'in the green', although bulbs are still a cheap way to get started if you can protect them after planting.

Growing from bulbs

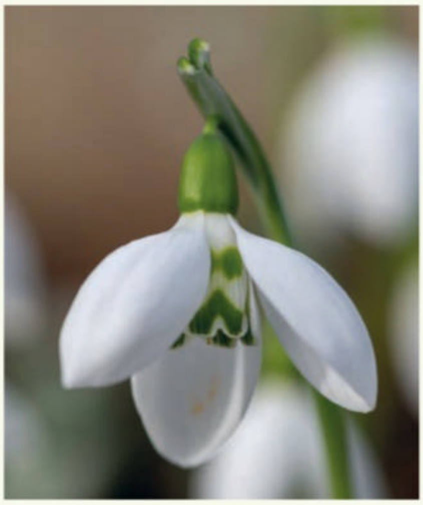
Snowdrop bulbs are normally planted in autumn (up until November), to give them the best chance to establish roots before winter, but weather permitting, there may still be time to get some in the ground if you are quick as this year has been so mild. They dislike drying out, so moisture is necessary. Always choose bulbs that feel firm and plump because if they are hollow, they won't be viable.

Plant bulbs about 10cm (4in) deep and roughly 5cm (2in) apart in clumps so they can naturalise well. If planted in straight lines, they can look odd. Choose a site in part or full shade with moist but well-drained soil and add in a little organic matter such as leaf mould.

Once planted, water well and protect from wildlife if needed. Snowdrops started from bulbs may take a couple of years to be fully on show, but are well worth the wait.

Growing 'in the green'

If you wait till spring you can plant snowdrops 'in the green', which is when actively growing plants are lifted just after flowering while the foliage is still green and healthy. This is usually between late February and April. Plant them at the same depth they were growing before - take note of the soil mark on the stems. Water thoroughly and let them settle.



Above: *Galanthus* 'Grumpy' with a grumpy but fun green face

Find new varieties

Some snowdrop cultivars, such as 'Grumpy' with its quirky little green face, can command quite a price. More accessibly priced yet delightful choices include *G. nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* 'Flore Pleno' with gorgeous double blooms, greater snowdrop *G. elwesii* and *G. nivalis* 'Viridapice' with green tips on its petals.

Buy potted snowdrops

At this time of year you can buy potted snowdrops from many garden centres and grow them on a windowsill in the home for earlier flowers.

Above: Planting new snowdrops 'in the green' when they have finished flowering is a good way to add to your collection

Above: At this time of your, potted snowdrops are available to buy for indoor decorations, and they can be planted in the garden afterwards

A pretty bowl or pot of snowdrops brings a cool, calm presence to a room

Snowdrop wellness projects

Tending to small, delicate flowers in the winter months is a gentle form of cold-weather wellness, bringing patience, appreciation and connection with nature's rhythms, which we so often try to fight against. Whether you grow them in drifts outside or in a pretty bowl on a windowsill, snowdrops promise lighter days to come.

Winter gardening is perfect for soothing, creative projects that invite calm and wellness, so why not take some time to create a woodland snowdrop corner in the garden? This will give a quiet area to which you can make a peaceful retreat when you need it.

Snowdrop bowl of peace

Indoors, plant a bowl of flowering snowdrops. A wide, shallow bowl works well and can fit a few smaller pots of flowering snowdrops. It doesn't matter if they are slightly higher than the bowl because once placed into the pot, as closely together as you can, you can cover the tops with moss or even dried leaves and pine cones.

Ideally place it in a bright but cool spot such as the porch or an unheated conservatory where you can appreciate the delicate beauty of the flowers and remind yourself of resilience and hope. When these have finished flowering, they can be planted outside in the garden.

*Please note all parts of the snowdrop are poisonous if ingested, and should not be handled by pregnant women.

Snowdrop day

I absolutely adore visiting NGS open gardens in late winter to see swathes of naturalised snowdrops and new, exciting varieties. It's well worth doing some research now to plan a snowdrop day where you can visit a number of gardens or take time to walk through your local nature reserve to see snowdrops emerging.

Take a notebook to record the varieties you see so when you return home, your notes could become sketches, short reflections or inspiration to go snowdrop shopping for your garden.

The Sustainable Plant Store sponsors this column and has some very exciting varieties available.

A snowdrop day can become a meaningful annual ritual, as it is to me, and over time the notebook becomes a diary of where you went and your thoughts at the time. It's a superb reminder that life returns each year to the garden.

Above: This winter, search for and visit local snowdrop gardens. Take a notebook to collect memories and make sketches of the plants you see

© Ellen Mary

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GROWING FROM SEED

with **Ruth Hayes**

These bright multi-tasking plants are a must!

Nasturtiums can care for the soil and vegetable plants and look pretty too

Above: **'Tip Top Apricot' is a long-flowering nasturtium with pretty peach flowers** Inset: **Nasturtiums are excellent companion plants and help protect crops from pests**

This year's nasturtiums did so well and far outdid my expectations. After a slow start, they moved into top gear in late summer and continued to grow and flower until mid-November.

They also self-seeded throughout the raised beds where I sowed them as companion plants, adding colour with their bright flowers while their leaves shielded the soil, helped keep in moisture and suppress weeds. Their peppery deliciousness was lovely in summer salads too.

Next year I'll be growing more, including some with more subtle colours like 'Tip Top Apricot', which has a long flowering season and holds its delicately hued blooms well above the leaves.

In spring, you can either sow seeds where you wish them to grow, or start them undercover in colder areas and plant out when the risk of frosts has passed.

Remember to hold back on feeding, as too much richness can make plants produce lots of leaves at the expense of their beautiful blooms.

All images credit: © Shutterstock

Everlasting easy colour

Strawflowers are suitable for all gardens

- *Xerochrysum bracteatum* 'Bright Bikini' Mixed (also known as Helichrysum 'Bright Bikini') is a delightful dwarf variety of strawflower, producing colourful blooms up to 8cm (3in) wide.
- They reach 50cm (19.6in) in height and are easy to grow.
- Sow in late winter or early spring onto trays of peat-free seed compost that has been tamped down and dampened with fresh tap water.
- The seeds need direct light, so simply add a lid to the tray or seal the pot in a clear plastic bag and place it somewhere light, removing the lid/bag at germination.
- Transplant seedlings into individual pots when they are robust enough to handle and grow them somewhere cool before hardening them off and adding them to the garden.

'Bright Bikini' Mixed is a vibrant dwarf form of strawflower

What's On

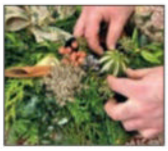
13 Dec: Patchworking Garden Project Christmas Wreath and Craft Sale, Pixham Lane, Dorking, Surrey, RH4 1QA. Visitors can purchase festive hand-crafted creations, plants, refreshments, arts & crafts.

13 Dec: A talk on orchids by Spicesotic Plants for Cambridgeshire Plant Heritage Group, William Collyn Centre, Wellbrook Way, Girton, Cambridge, CB3 0GP. From 2.30pm, non-members welcome with £5 admission (free for members).

20-21 Dec: Burnham Nurseries & Orchid Paradise Open Weekend, Burnham Nurseries, Forches Cross, Newton Abbot, Devon, TQ12 6PZ.

20 Dec: Athelhampton House open for NGS: Athelhampton, Dorchester, Dorset, DT2 7LG. The gardens of one of West Dorset's most historic properties are open for visitors, including the 12 giant yew topiaries.

3 Jan: Colesbourne Snowdrop Collection and my Work as Head Gardener – a talk by Kate Reynolds, Longdown Village Hall, Longdown, near Exeter, EX6 7SN. Devon Hardy Plant Society Meeting, doors open 2pm, snowdrop nurseries attending include Buckland Cottage, Elworthy Cottage, & Triffids.



There are some lovely festive events at Great Comp Garden near Sevenoaks in Kent this month.

On December 13 there is a fresh wreath-making workshop using seasonal greenery sourced from the garden and surrounding countryside. Each session includes tools and materials plus a light lunch. The event runs from 10am to 2pm and costs £55.

You can also enjoy special Christmas afternoon teas from December 15 to 21.

Costing £36.99 a head, the menu includes sandwiches, scones and cakes, and unlimited tea or coffee, or a glass of sparkling wine.

Call Joe Lane at tearoom@greatcompgarden.co.uk or 01732 882681

Dates and times are correct when going to press. Thanks to **pumpkinbeth.com** for the listings - check her site for more details. Please send us details of your events at least six weeks in advance to **editor@amateurgardening.com** Always check events are going ahead before leaving home.

THE SELF-SUFFICIENT (ish) GARDENER

with **Andrew Oldham**

Christmas trees can look good outside as well as inside

© Shutterstock

How to embrace the outdoors this Christmas

Andrew Oldham explains how fostering a spirit of togetherness can help to banish the winter blues

All images unless otherwise credited: Andrew Oldham

This time of year, with all the pressure to spend, spend, spend, can leave folk worrying about money and wellbeing. We have come a long way from the days of the traditional wassail ceremony, the Lord of Mischief and the Apple Tree Man, but the Green Man lingers in our gardens still as a reminder of how much nature means to us all and there is much hope and joy to be found therein.

Twelfth Night in our household still heralds the wassail, the anointing of the fruit trees with bread and cider. In our garden, the drums strike up, the singing starts and the mulled cider is quaffed and spilled among the apple trees. However, wassailing is not recorded this far north and is often associated with orchards further south, where they anoint the trees with bread and the roots with cider. We are far looser in this neck of the woods and we may or may not spill more cider on the tree than the roots.

That drunken revelry aside, our ancestors knew the importance of getting outside during the dark months to enjoy what little light they had. Christmas was once a month-long celebration of communities coming together, but as the world has become faster, the true spirit of Christmas outdoors has shrunk.

I think it is important that we all do our bit to claim back the spirit of togetherness in these dark months. No presents need to swap hands, just food, drink, music and laughter. There is something about the season that calls for warmth and light in the darkness, for tales and drinks, jokes and japes. So let's get outside when we can, reach out to others with a 'season's greetings', nod, smile or wave. Our time is so little and, like Charles Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Present, we should embrace what we have.

A self-sufficiency idea: – preserving

We usually think of preserving as a late-summer job, but even in winter you can preserve your crops.

There are only so many parsnips and cabbages you can eat, and if you want to store cabbages, you can shred and boil them for a minute before placing them in iced water to blanch. Then freeze in bags.

Parsnips, like carrots, can be stored in sand (not sharp sand) in a closed bin outside – you can sink this into the ground to give yourself an earth fridge. If you don't fancy that, then why not give them as presents throughout the month to friends and neighbours.

Andrew explains why now is a good time to get preserving some of the lovely homegrown brassica leaves

Above: You can make a leaf wreath using twigs tied together, or with a cardboard backing (inset) for indoor use as Andrew suggests

How to make a leaf wreath

It is easy at this time of year to splash out on expensive wreaths that end up in the bin by Boxing Day, but all you need for a compostable wreath is a large piece of cardboard, sticky tape, a piece of string or ribbon 20cm (8in) long, a glue stick and a drawing pin.

1. On a cool, dry day in early December, collect a carrier bag of dried leaves from outside.

2. Place the leaves on a sunny windowsill for a few days to completely dry out.

3. On a table covered with newspaper, cut the cardboard into a 30cm (12in) ring.

4. Cover quarter of the ring, on one side, with glue.

5. Press the dried leaves onto the glue. Work around the ring until it is completely covered. Leave to dry for an hour.

6. Turn the leaf ring over, double up the 20cm (8in) piece of string or ribbon to make a loop that is 10cm (4in) long, and attach it to the back of the cardboard ring with sticky tape.

7. Use the drawing pin to attach the ring to a door inside the home.

8. After Christmas, remove the sticky tape and compost the wreath.

You can also have variations on this by using pine cones and holly leaves.

About **Andrew Oldham**

■ Andrew Oldham is a self-sufficient(ish) gardener who believes in the joy of down-to-earth growing and cooking. He lives high on the Saddleworth hills with his family at Pig Row. Find him on all social media platforms as **@lifeonpigrow**

Netting brassicas will help protect them over winter

Jobs for the fortnight

1. Plant blackberries and other soft fruit. Remember to hard prune them to allow the roots to establish.

2. Prune large, free-standing apple and pear trees to control their shape and size and increase yields while encouraging rapid growth in spring.

3. Lift and divide large rhubarb plants. Replant the newest parts and add well-rotted manure.

4. Pot up a clump of rhubarb and place it in the greenhouse. Cover it with an upside-down bin for an early crop of pink, sweet stems in early spring.

5. Cover all brassicas with netting to avoid pigeon attack.

6. Snap off any yellow or dead leaves on brassicas to prevent fungal diseases.

7. If you have planted Brussels sprouts, place a cane beside them for support and tie in. Strong winter winds can make them topple over.

Rhubarb can be lifted and divided now and made ready for forcing some come spring

Patrick Kielty was the celebrity host of the 2025 GIMA Industry awards at the Celtic Manor Resort in Newport

Honouring innovation and achievement

The **2025 GIMA Award winners** are revealed

The garden industry came together in style for the sold-out 2025 GIMA Awards, held at the magnificent Celtic Manor Resort in Newport. The night was a true celebration of creativity, innovation and dedication, as the industry's leading suppliers and manufacturers were recognised for their outstanding achievements over the past year.

Across 18 categories, winners were chosen for their exceptional products, initiatives, and contributions to the ever-evolving world of garden retail. This year's judging panel brought together voices from across the gardening retail sector, including *Amateur Gardening* magazine editor Kim Stoddart, who attended the event with *AG* columnist Liz Zorab.

Helping to kick off the evening's celebrations in style was Patrick Kielty, whose warmth, humour and sharp wit set the perfect tone for a night of celebration. His quick-fire energy and easy rapport with the audience made for a lively and memorable start to proceedings.

GIMA AWARDS
GIMA
PAY Greenfingers Charity
£15,000.00

Above: Raising money for the horticultural charity Greenfingers

GIMA AWARDS
TOOLBANK
Durstons
GARDENA
HOZELOCK
Amateur GARDENING
Webb

Above: *Amateur Gardening* magazine was one of the GIMA sponsors, with editor Kim Stoddart and columnist Liz Zorab in attendance at the award event

GIMA AWARDS 2025 – THE WINNERS

One of the most coveted accolades is the GIMA Sword of Excellence, and this year saw GARDENA UK take home the title thanks to its AquaBloom L, which utilises intuitive Micro-Drip technology to keep up to 30 plants thriving without the need for an outside tap or power source.

The GCA Supplier of the Year Award

This year, Woodlodge Products claimed the title of 'Large Business' Supplier of the Year, while Meadow View Stone was named 'Small to Medium Business' Supplier of the Year.

Next on the awards roster was the Gardenex Export Achievement Award, which this year went to Smart Garden Products.

When it came to sustainability, there was only one winner for the judges – Elho. They commented: "At last, a good-looking, well-designed and affordable home composter with excellent sustainable credentials too. Well done, Elho!"

Crafted from 100% recycled plastic and fully recyclable, the Elho Composter 200L promotes circular living by turning organic waste into valuable compost – reducing landfill and enriching soil naturally.

GIMA AWARDS 2025 - PRODUCT AWARDS

Garden Care - sponsored by Decco
Winner: **Vitax – Dahlia Feeder**

Growing Planting Equipment & Sundries
Winner: **GARDENA UK - Gardena AquaBloom L**

Garden Tools, Machinery & Implements – sponsored by Toolbank
Winner: **GARDENA UK - StarCut Pro L Set, Bypass Cut, Telescopic Pruning Lopper with Saw and Adapter**

Outdoor Leisure – sponsored by LOFA
Winner: **Woodlodge - Eco Cushions**

Plants, Seeds & Bulbs
Winner: **Mr Fothergill's Seeds - DT Brown Vegetable Seeds Range**

Garden Landscaping
Winner: **Keter - Keter Potting Shed**

Garden Clothing & Gifts
Winner: **Primeur - Bree Merryn Doormat Collection**

Pet Care, Aquatics & Wild Bird Care
Winner: **FeatherSnap (Reveal HoldCo) - FeatherSnap – the smart, solar powered bird feeder**

Garden Lighting, Water Features & Ornamentation
Winner: **Altico - Whirlpool Water Feature**

Decorative Pots & Planters
Winner: **Woodlodge - Liberty**

GIMA AWARDS 2025 – MARKETING AWARDS

Best Point of Sale Material
Winner: Meadow View Stone - Aggregates and Paving POS with Augmented Reality

Best Marketing Campaign
Winner: Elho - Smart Pebble Multi-Channel Marketing Campaign

About GIMA

GIMA is a membership organisation of around 200 companies representing the majority share of suppliers and manufacturers operating within the UK gardening industry, together with an estimated £4billion in annual trade. GIMA's goal is to promote the commercial, trading and industrial interests of its UK and EU-based members supplying the UK garden retail industry. Run by a small team of dedicated professionals, and governed by a council of members, GIMA is funded by membership subscriptions and services. The range of services and support provided for members is extensive, offering something for all members, regardless of their size or heritage.

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GIMA AWARDS 2025 Winner

WINNER

Plants, Seeds and Bulbs category 2025

Sustainable style for every home and garden

From chic houseplant pots and outdoor planters to practical grow-your-own and plant care accessories, elho is bringing style and sustainability to every home and garden.

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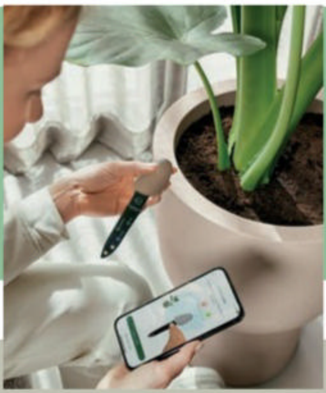

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Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

Replacing a pond and moving a tree

Important jobs for the dormant seasons

Q We would like to replace our garden pond as we think it may have a leak. When would be the best time to replace it? Also, how easy is it to transplant these 'trees'?
G. Barham (via email)

A I am sorry that your pond is leaking, but pleased that you are keen to replace it. Unless you wish to use a rigid pond liner, I urge you to invest in butyl rubber sheeting which has a 50-year life span. Now, when there is little activity in the pond, is the best time to replace it.

Ideally, save the water, and its aquatic plants, fish and other animals in a plastic container supported by sturdy posts, reintroducing it all when you have laid the new liner.

As for transplanting the two mature cordylines growing through the arch, dig them out with as much soil as possible around their roots. Ideally, water them copiously before tackling the task so that soil clings to the roots.

The easy way to lift them is to hire a mini digger, which saves the considerable effort required for digging them out by hand.

Finally, reset them in holes two or three times the size of the root balls and support them with stakes driven in at an angle 45 degrees to the trunk, securing it with padded ties. Let's hope they like their new position, which should be in full sun.

These mature cordylines need a new home where they can thrive

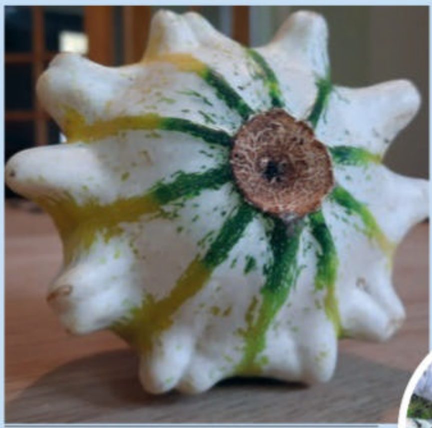
Can you explain my unusual squash?

Q When I cleared the final pumpkins from the allotment, I found this unusual pumpkin. I'm intrigued to know the variety as I've never seen this before and was unaware I even had seeds for this variety.
Steve Watkin (via email)

A Intriguing, isn't it. For some reason – a seed may have inadvertently found its way into a packet of conventional squash seeds – you have grown a summer or custard squash, also called *scallopini*, patty pan or tulip squash.

In Australia it's known as button squash and in France it has the name of *pâtisson*. Pleasingly, it makes an enjoyable meal and is best fried or boiled like a courgette. The important thing is to eat it young and tender.

There are white and yellow-fruited varieties and both are appealingly ornamental.



Above: Sometimes stray seeds can provide wonderful surprises

Quick questions & answers

Above: Ornamental grasses are left to provide winter interest

When should I cut back grasses?

Q Our large ornamental grass is in a pot and faces north-east. When can I cut it back?
Jan Schut (via email)

A Thank you for the images of several grasses. They are best left alone now and will provide interest in the garden through the winter months.

The usual time to shorten them to within a few inches from the base is March or April, when they start growing again.

Moving a self-seeded foxglove

Q I want to move a foxglove that has self-seeded - can I do it now?
Hannah Worthington (via email)

A Yes you can. Assuming it has grown from seed this year and formed a rosette of leaves, which will produce a flower next spring, use a spade to lift it carefully, keeping the root ball intact.

You can either pot it up and keep it in a greenhouse or cold frame until spring or plant it where you want it to grow.

Keep it watered and it will delight you next year.

Left: Either pot up or plant the biennial foxglove

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Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

How can I control my celandine population?

It can spread but is important for early pollinators

Celandines are a common spring flower that can become invasive

Q I have lesser celandine growing in one of my flower beds and it really takes over in spring for weeks and spreads. I have tried cutting off the flower heads but to no avail, if you have a solution I would be so grateful.
Marie Gleeson (via email)

A I am sorry that lesser celandine has been a little pushy in your garden. It can be a problem when it spreads so much but we always recommend leaving some plants in situ to provide food for overwintering pollinators such as bumblebees.

The best natural method would be to cover the area with light-excluding, heavy-duty weed-control fabric. Made from UV-stabilised woven polypropylene, it remains effective, stopping weeds from appearing for around six years. Ideally, disguise it with chipped bark. If you keep the membrane in place for a year or so, your excess celandines should wither and die.

Alternatively, if you are patient and have the time, use a border fork to remove this weed in early spring when tubers are tightly attached to the plant. If you do it later in the year, they tend to break off and make new plants.

What has emerged from my sansevieria?

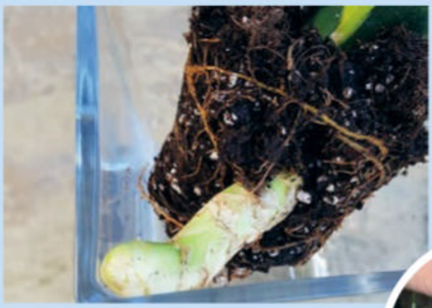
Q My mother-in-law's tongue plant had pushed itself out of its pot and when I lifted the whole plant out, it seemed to have an extra shoot growing in the soil. Is it a 'runner' from the original plant and what should I do with it?
Brenda Beadle (via email)

A Plants never cease to amaze me. It's the first time I've seen a sansevieria produce such a monstrous appendage.

If a new shoot forms, it usually appears vertically from the compost, not horizontally as yours has.

Ultimately, it will surface and add to the charm of this striking plant. Hopefully, when your plant matures, it may flower for you, producing slender stems clad with tubular fragrant greenish-white blooms.

Please let us know how this fat rhizomatous growth develops.



Above: This unusual new shoot will make its way to the surface

Quick questions & answers

Almond oil can resolve a problem with fungus gnats

How to get rid of indoor flies

Q Our houseplant compost is full of tiny black flies. How can I get rid of them?
A Duggan (via email)

A They are fungus gnats, greyish-brown flies that lay eggs in damp compost.

They are more annoying than damaging and the best way to beat them is to let compost dry out in between waterings - which you should do in winter anyway.

You can also pop a bottle lid of sweet almond oil on the compost. It attracts the flies and makes for easy removal.

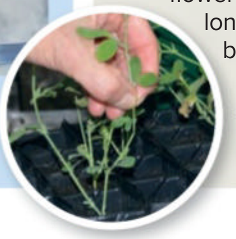
Is it too late to sow sweet peas?

Q Can I sow sweet peas now or should I wait until spring?
Becky McDonnal (via email)

A By all means, sow them into loo roll tubes or deep pots and, because they are hardy, you can germinate them in a cold frame or greenhouse. Make sure you have some fleece to hand for very cold nights.

When the seedlings are growing, pinch them out when they get to 10in (4cm) tall to encourage side shoots that will produce more flowers.

Sow some more in spring - they will flower a little later so you get a longer season of scent and blooms.



Left: Sow now and pinch them out for strong growth

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Ask JOHN NEGUS

John is a gardening legend and here to answer your lovely questions

Sand and grit are important for improving the drainage in soil

What is the best sand for improving soil?

There are many different sands and they all have a use

Q Please would you clarify the differences between horticultural sand, sharp sand, coarse grit and silver sand. I was looking to improve my clay soil, but not sure which is the correct product.
Tracy Fox (via email)

A Such a good question. Essentially, all the products you mention – horticultural sand, sharp sand, coarse grit and silver sand – are ideal for improving the drainage and aeration of heavy clay soil. There are, however, differences:

Horticultural sand, which is specially washed and lime-free, and sharp sand, are virtually the same. They prevent soil compaction and are good for making clay workable.

Coarse grit is small particles of usually crushed granite; it can also be used as a decorative top dressing.

Silver sand: Horticultural grade sand made from quartz particles, ideal for drainage, rooting cuttings or seed sowing. Often used for 'zen' gardening, when it is raked into meaningful patterns.

As for improving your soil, I suggest that you use any of the above products mixed with a liberal dressing of composted manure. Apply this combination annually to create topsoil that's a joy to work, plant and weed.

Is it still safe to mow the lawn?

Q Should I stop mowing my lawn yet? It is still growing and if I don't use the mower it will be like a jungle by spring.
Andy White, Nr Pershore

A Keep mowing grass that's still growing when it is dry but don't have the blades too low and never mow when grass is frosted.

If earthworms are creating soily casts on the grass, wait for a dry day and use a flexible cane to crumble them away before they can be trodden in, providing a launchpad for weeds.

You can also scarify the lawn, using a lawn rake to remove dead grass, moss and other vegetal debris from among the grass roots. It is also a good season to prune any deciduous trees that are hanging over the lawn. Cutting them back will increase sunlight and airflow and help reduce the formation of moss.

Above: Grass will still grow during mild winter spells, so mow if you feel you need to

Quick questions & answers

Bulbs planted now will flower later in the spring

Can I still plant spring bulbs?

Q Is it too late to plant my remaining daffodil bulbs? I've just found some in the shed!
John Collins (via email)

A Pleasingly, no. Though they are best planted from late August through to October, because summer-dormant bulbs start to root early, we've trialled late planting, even up until late December, and plants have performed well.

Certainly, flowers will appear later than normal, but that's a bonus, for you will be enjoying them for longer.

When can I prune my raspberries?

Q When do I cut back autumn raspberries? Should I do it now?
Mark Hardy (via email)

A All canes on autumn-yielding plants are cut back to the ground in January or February to make room for new canes to grow and fruit.

Tie new canes to supporting wires with soft twine in spring and summer and mulch generously with moisture-conserving garden compost or composted manure.

Right: Autumn-fruiting raspberries are cut back in late winter

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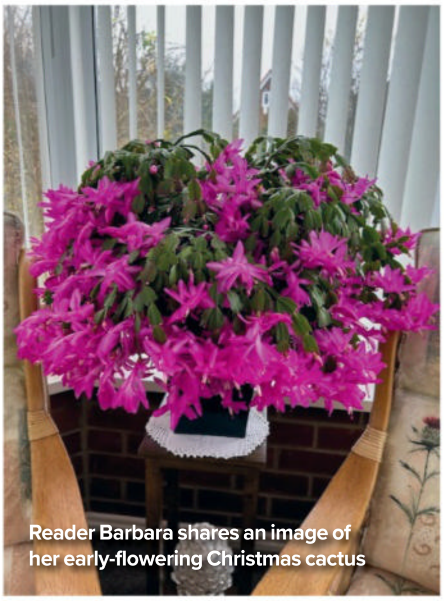
Your LETTERS TO KIM

We love receiving your letters, emails and social media posts. Every message, poem, idea and comment matters. Please keep them coming. We will send out a thank you gift for every item published in the magazine as soon as we can, so do please send your address and contact details when you get in touch.

Joyful Christmas cactus

Hi Kim,
Please see the photo of my Christmas cactus which has decided that Christmas has come early this year. It is in full bloom and looks absolutely gorgeous. I have had it for a number of years and every year it does me proud. Each year after the last frosts I put it outside in the garden (still in its pot) until just before any autumn/winter frosts when I bring it back indoors and give it a feed of cactus food. As we had some early frosts this year, it has been in my conservatory since mid October and I water it once a week. It flowered before Christmas last year and then flowered again just before Easter, so I am hoping it is going to do the same again this time. I'm very proud of my cactus and hopefully by sending the picture it will spread joy to others.

Kind regards
Barbara Hampson, North Yorkshire



Reader Barbara shares an image of her early-flowering Christmas cactus

Kim says; thank you so much sharing this image of your lovely Christmas cactus Barbara - it look so healthy and vibrant - a real treat to see!

Bring back the word search for *AG*

Dear Kim
I totally agree with your reader on a recent letters page about returning the word search. It is my favourite quiz.

Regarding the reader's letter regarding cotoneaster. I have been growing them from berries with great success for many years. I have also grown beech trees from the nuts successfully.

Thank you for a great magazine
Jean Chesworth, Cumnock

Kim says; thank you to Jean and the many other readers that have been in touch asking for the return of the wordsearch. We really appreciate your getting in touch and rest assured the word search will be returning in 2026.

Please send us your letters, poems and musings

Your contribution is such an important part of this magazine, now and for the future.

AG is for you the people, for gardeners and proud custodians of gardens everywhere, so please do write in. We will send a gift for each letter, poem and musing published.

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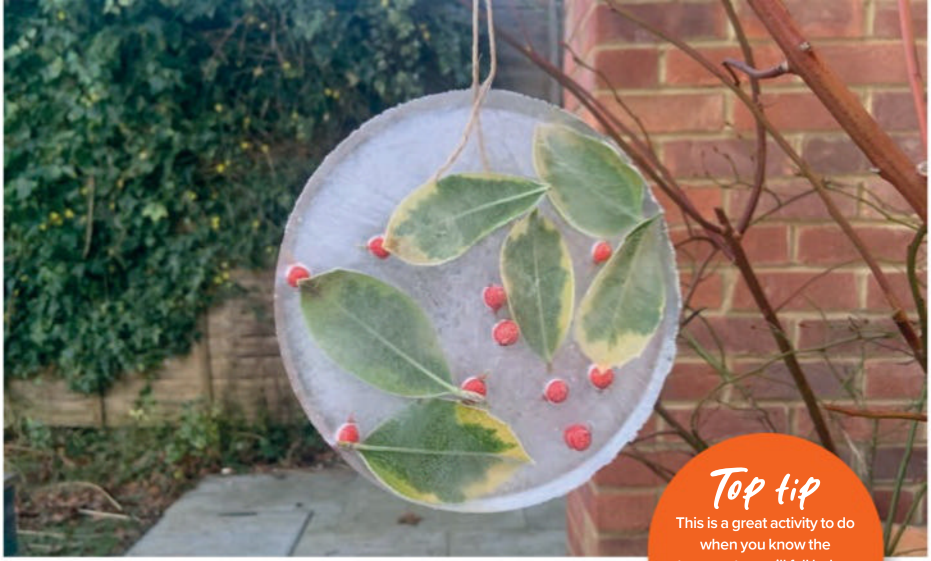


Create a simple but beautiful frozen work of art using this wonderful technique from Thrive

Top tip

This is a great activity to do when you know the temperature will fall below freezing at night. It is also best done on a day that is not too windy.

Above: Gently pour water over your arrangement

Gardening for wellbeing

In this monthly series, the fantastic folk at health charity **Thrive** offer some lovely project ideas to help you find excuses to enjoy the nurturing potential of your garden and the natural world at large

Project – frozen plant art

Duration: 20 to 40 minutes

Creating frozen plant art can provide the motivation to wrap up and pop outside on a chilly day, enjoying fresh air for a few minutes

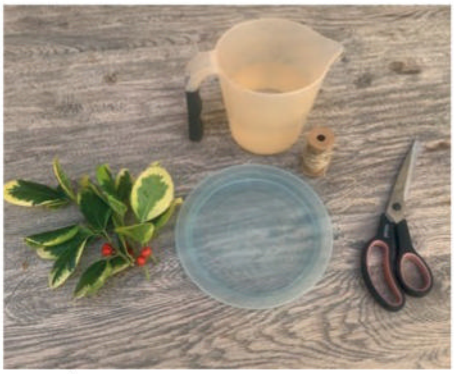
Feel joy seeing your finished piece the next day. It may gradually drip and melt through the day - a wonderful living artwork!

Items you will need

- Plant material (leaves, berries, seed heads)
- Scissors
- A shallow dish or bowl
- Water
- A length of string

- Collect natural items for your artwork. Look for interesting leaves, berries or other items in your garden or around your local area.
- Once you have these, gather everything else and find a comfortable spot to work at. A table inside is ideal.
- Position your plant material on your shallow dish or bowl. You want the plant material to sit fairly flat. This way, you can cover it partly or fully with water.
- Snipping off leaves may make them easier to arrange. Berries can also be arranged individually.
- There is no real right or wrong here. Enjoy trying different arrangements and see what happens.
- Once you are happy with your arrangement, gently fill the dish with water. All plant material should be at least partly covered with water.
- The plant material may move a bit when you add water. If so, move it gently back into place once the water is added.
- You could add water first and plant material second. If you do this, try to push the plant material so it is partly under the water and not just floating on top.
- Very carefully carry your dish with plant material and water outside. Find a flat, sheltered spot where it can sit overnight.

Top tip It needs to be freezing overnight for this to work. If it's not cold enough, you could put your dish in the freezer instead. The only difference is that a warmer outside temperature will make the artwork melt quicker once done.



Gather your chosen materials before creating your art

- Create a loop with the string and leave it dangling over the edge of the dish. You could gently tuck the loop underneath the dish so the string doesn't blow away.
- Now, leave your arrangement overnight for the magic to happen!
- If the temperature has been cold enough, your arrangement will freeze solid overnight.
- Use the loop of string to gently remove the frozen disc from the dish. Hopefully, it will come out easily. If it gets stuck, bring the artwork inside. As it warms, it should become easier to remove. Don't leave it inside for too long though!
- Hang your frozen art from any branch, bird feeder or hook in the garden. Depending on the weather, it may stay frozen for several days. Or, you can watch it gradually drip through the day as it melts.
- Congratulations, you have created a beautifully temporary artwork! Now, you can look forward to the next freezing day and the opportunity to try a different arrangement.

Above: Every freezing cold day offers new possibilities

Would you like more wellbeing inspiration?

Thrive is a gardening for health charity that supports people to transform their lives through gardening.You can find out more wellbeing gardening activities through their Cultivating Wellbeing app which helps you garden your way to better health. *www.thrive.org.uk/cultivatingwellbeing*

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5 heritage crafts every gardener should try

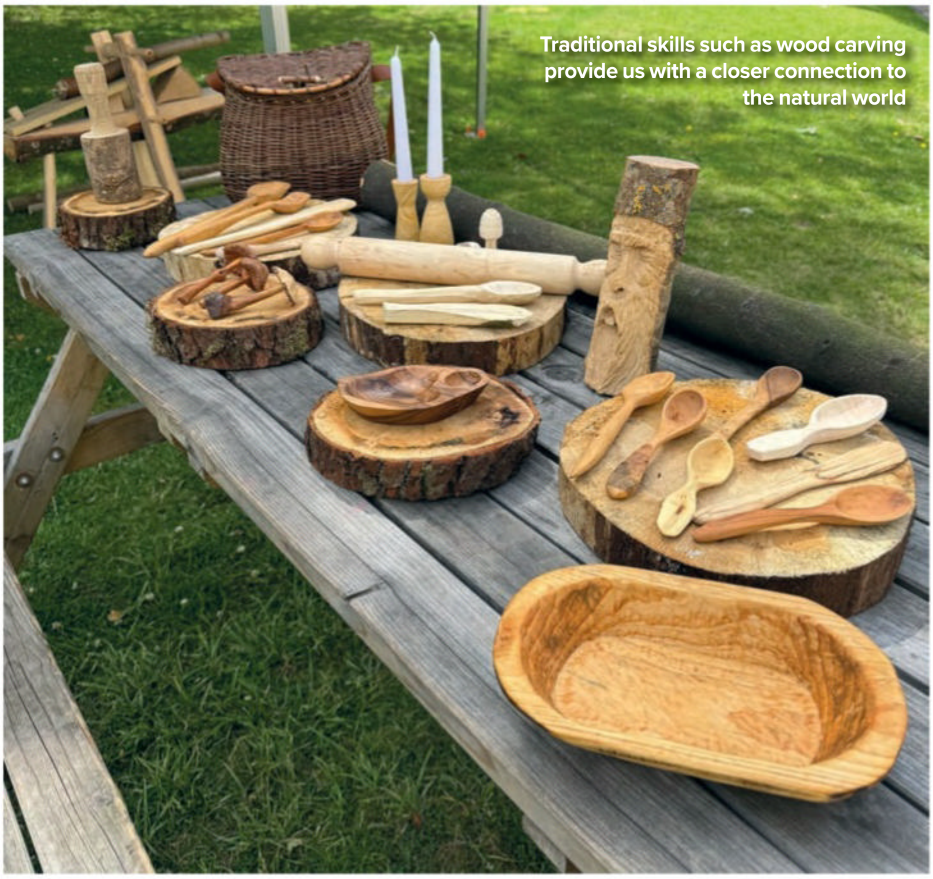
Ross Pearson extols the happiness that comes from learning and embracing traditional skills

There's something deeply satisfying about being a little old-fashioned. I don't mean wearing a tweed jacket in July or insisting everything was better in 'the good old days' (though let's face it, it just was), I mean the simple, timeless joy of making useful things with your own hands, straight from your garden.

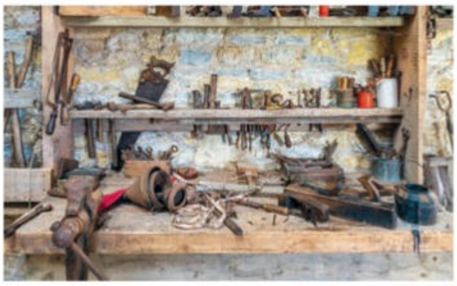
In an age of power tools, plastic widgets and next-day delivery, it's easy to forget that gardeners once had to do everything the slow way, and despite the extra graft, it was far more rewarding.

Heritage crafts are creeping back into the modern garden, not just because they save money or make for an impressive social media post, but because they reconnect us to plants, wood and soil in a deeply grounding way.

So, here are five traditional crafts that are perfectly suited to today's gardener. They'll give you a project, a workout, a story to tell, and best of all, something genuinely useful at the end of it.



Traditional skills such as wood carving provide us with a closer connection to the natural world

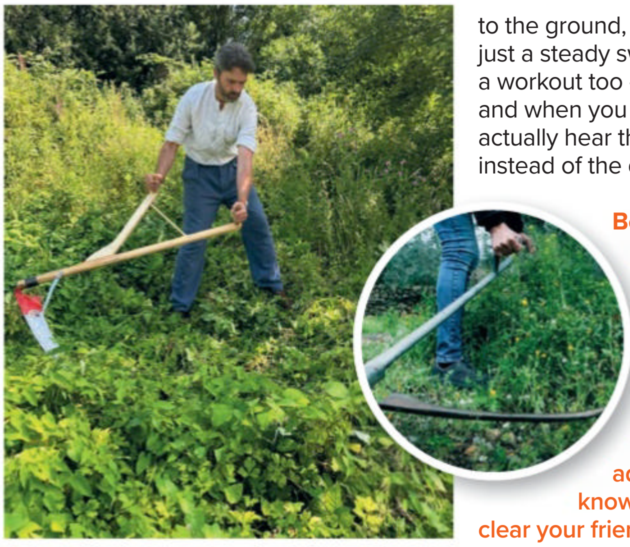


Above: There is something very appealing about the sight of a workbench and a host of well-used, cared-for tools

Scything

Forget the deafening petrol strimmer. A good scythe is quiet, smoke-free, and makes you feel like an extra in a period drama. Properly sharpened and swished, it will slice through long grass, nettles, and brambles with graceful ease.

Scything is an ancient art (the Romans were at it long before lawnmowers were even a twinkle in Mr Budding's eye). The rhythm is key: a wide, sweeping arc close to the ground, no hacking or chopping, just a steady swish-swish. It's one heck of a workout too - half Tai Chi, half gardening; and when you pause for breath, you'll actually hear the bees in the clover instead of the drone of machinery.



Beginner's tip - start small. Clear a patch, not a meadow. A sharp blade makes all the difference, so learn the joy of sharpening and keep a whetstone in your pocket. Be warned - scything is seriously addictive and before you know it, you'll be volunteering to clear your friends' allotments.

Scything is a quiet and ancient skill that is easy to pick up - and gives a good workout too!

All images unless otherwise credited: Ross Pearson

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Above: Your garden is a natural apothecary and you can use the herbs and flowers to make everything from scented oils to salves and soap

Distilling plants

Your garden isn't just for sitting back and admiring, it's a green apothecary waiting to be brewed and bottled. Distilling plants to make hydrosols, oils, balms, and even soaps is a tradition as old as gardening itself. Medieval monks did it, apothecaries thrived on it, and now it's your turn.

A stove-top rig (or an alembic still if you really want to do it properly) will extract fragrant waters and oils from herbs like lavender, rosemary, or mint. These can be used as room sprays, toners, or the base for homemade creams. Calendula petals make a soothing balm, comfrey root can be turned into a salve for bruises, and if you fancy getting properly medieval, rosewater makes your baking smell divine.

Beginner's tip - don't get overwhelmed by equipment. Start with infusing oils, just herbs steeped in olive oil on a sunny windowsill, then move on to balms by adding a little beeswax or unrefined shea butter. Soap-making is a gloriously messy next step. Why bother paying high street prices when it's all there in your back garden?

Seed labels

Plastic seed labels, let's be honest, are awful. They fade, snap, and end up littering the veg patch like the gravestones of crops that never germinated.

Hazel, on the other hand, grows everywhere, coppices happily, and splits into the most satisfying little strips. To make a seed label, take a length of straight hazel (or willow at a pinch), split it with a penknife, and shave one side flat. Voilà: a rustic tag that you can scrawl on with a pencil. They won't blow away, they weather beautifully, and at the end of the season you can compost them without guilt.

Beginner's tip - make a batch in winter when you are pruning. Tie or stack them in bundles and you'll thank yourself come spring when you can actually remember which green shoots are onions and which are gladioli.

Above: A thoughtful gift for the gardeners in your life (and for your own plot) is a bundle of handcrafted plant labels made from lengths of pruned hazel. They are attractive, weatherproof, and can be composted at the end of the season

© Shutterstock

A hand-carved wooden gift shows thought and consideration, is beautifully personal and will cost you nothing but your time

Above: Ross describes whittling fruit wood as 'pocket-sized woodworking' and encourages you to make everything from dibbers to spoons

Whittling

If you've ever pruned a fruit tree and thought 'what a shame to waste this wood', congratulations, you're already halfway to becoming a whittler.

Traditional garden tools and utensils were often carved from prunings: dibbers for planting, mallets for knocking in posts, even spoons for your soup. Whittling is pocket-sized woodworking. All you need is a sharp knife and something to sit on. A cherry branch can become a spatula, an applewood fork can become a dibber, and if it all goes terribly wrong you've still got kindling.

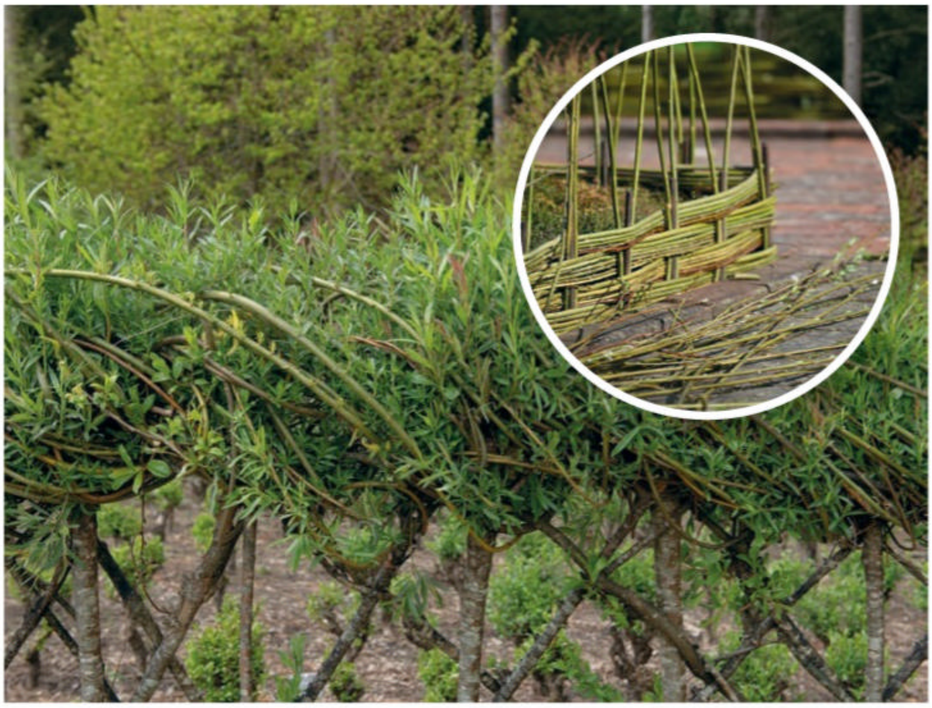
Beginner's tip - start with green (freshly cut) wood as it carves far easier than dry. Always cut away from yourself and keep your thumbs behind the blade, only wearing a glove on the hand that's holding the wood. No gift is more personal and thoughtful than a hand-carved gift, and as a bonus, all it costs is your time.

Living Fences

Before garden centres sold ready-made panels, people wove their own fences from whatever grew nearby. Willow and dogwood are particularly obliging, bending and rooting themselves as if eager to help.

A step-over fence (a low, woven boundary between beds) is as practical as it is pretty. Push stout rods into the ground as uprights, then weave thinner whips in and out to create a rustic lattice. Over time the living rods sprout leaves, turning your fence into a green, self-repairing structure the bees and birds will adore.

Beginner's tip - winter is the best time to cut rods, when the sap is down. Don't worry if your weave looks a bit wonky. Rustic is the point.



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Above: Living fences not only provide attractive boundaries in the garden, they regenerate and also offer food and shelter for garden birds and wildlife

Why bother?

You might be thinking: what's the point in swinging a scythe when I own a strimmer, or carving a spoon when the big blue Swedish shop does six for £1.50?

Because gardening isn't just about efficiency. It's about a connection to the land, to the seasons, and to the traditions that make us slow down and look again at what our gardens can give us.

Heritage crafts remind us that the garden isn't only for growing, it's for making. And when you're sipping lavender water from your own spoon while leaning against your living willow fence, you'll agree it was worth the splinters.

Above: Experimenting with heritage crafts to make utensils, balms and gifts is satisfying and grounding, says Ross

Impress friends and family with these beautiful stars made from natural materials

Make your own twig stars

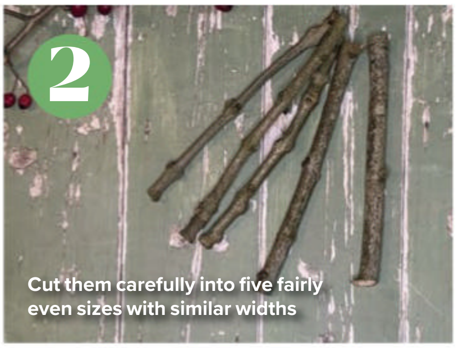
Sharon Gray shows you how to make some heavenly but simple decorations that don't cost the earth

These little festive stars are not only beautiful but meaningful, bringing a touch of rustic charm to your seasonal décor. They're eco-friendly, sustainable and wonderfully low-waste.

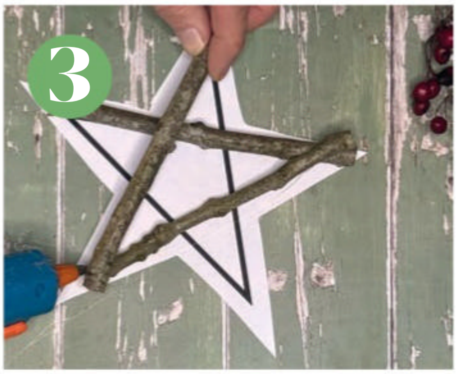
There's no plastic, no glitter, no landfill guilt, and absolutely no drama. You can also choose a glue that is environmentally safe and then these stars can be composted after use. Enjoy.

All images © Sharon Gray

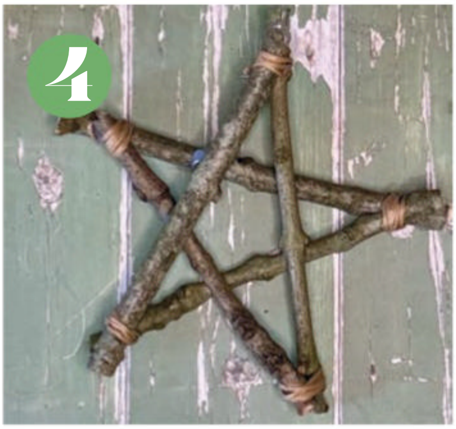
Collect your twigs



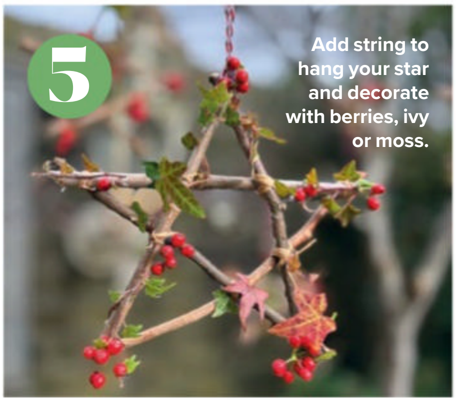
Cut them carefully into five fairly even sizes with similar widths



Above: For the first time you make these, print off a star shape as this will help guide you. Place the twigs in position and lightly glue the points where the twigs cross (using an eco-friendly glue)



Above: Once you have completed your shape, use twine to bind the corners where the glue spots are. This not only covers the glue but looks aesthetically pleasing



Add string to hang your star and decorate with berries, ivy or moss.

Gardening has been part of Niall's life since childhood, and it fills him with joy

The great 'guild garden' with a purpose

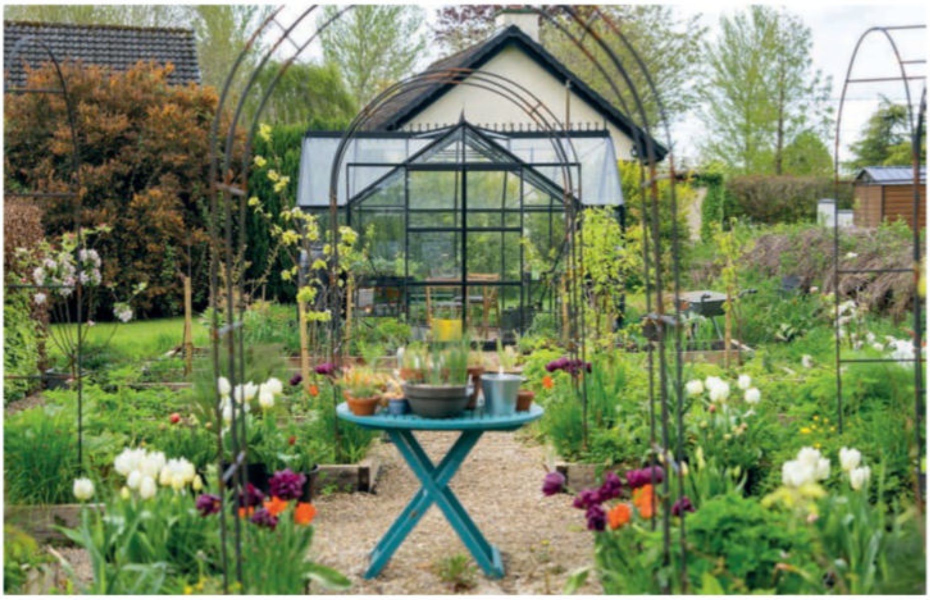
Niall McCauley explains the ethos behind his permaculture-led garden that connects him to nature and a growing community

All images unless otherwise credited: Niall McCauley

Gardening has been around me for as long as I can remember. Childhood afternoons spent helping my family, visiting sumptuous National Trust gardens at weekends, plus my own flowerbed in our back garden, filled me with a love of plants and gardening that I've come back to time and time again.

My own patch has taught me that gardening is about more than creating something with a singular purpose, be it purely productive or ornamental. It's about nurturing a space that gives back to you through food, beauty, solace, connection with other people and by supporting biodiversity around you. All of these things come together in what I've called my 'guild garden'.

When I viewed the house that is



Niall's 'guild garden' has room for flowers and produce, and provides a welcoming space for nature and a growing community of fellow gardeners

Above: Niall's free-spirited gardens are a polyculture paradise with fruit trees, ornamentals and edibles all mixed in together

now my home, I fell for the garden immediately. An acre hidden away in the Irish countryside, it had 'good bones': trees, shrubs, hedges, and ponds that gave it a feeling of maturity, but I knew that I wanted to make it my own. Where better to start than a vegetable garden?

A 'no rules' garden for experimenting

In 2021, I built a big 20m by 7m (65.6ft by 23ft) raised bed vegetable garden. It thrived, yet I always felt an uneasy sense of disconnection with it. Before long, I fell out of love with it - but why? I felt like I should be feeling grateful and fortunate. The answer came to me one winter afternoon when I realised that productivity meant more to me than just crops. Things needed to change and that change was the 'guild garden'.

My 'guild garden' is a kind of edible polyculture paradise where flowers, herbs and companion plants are planted around dwarf fruit trees to create mini ecosystems. It's my 'no rules' place where I can experiment - think Christopher Lloyd meets edible polyculture!

Above: Niall loves adding to his collection of colourful plants

Secretly, I'm a fan of quite minimalist, tidy gardens. However, in my garden, I've learned that there's a charm in having a rich mix of plant types. That slightly wilder edge brings balance, life, and a little mischief to the space. I'm happy to trade slightly lower productivity for a garden that is truly alive with colour, scent, and wildlife.

In spring, it's a vibrant mix of irises, tulips and daffodils, interspersed with early crops and the blossom on the 16 dwarf fruit trees. Summer is an exuberant mix of annuals, perennial flowers, and crops of every kind. Rows of plants? Nope! Instead, harvesting crops is like a mini foraging mission.

Above: For Niall harvesting crops is a fun foraging adventure, with edible produce freely growing armong his ornamental plants

Ornamentals grow mixed in with edibles resulting in a reduction of issues with pests and disease

Something for every season

Where many vegetable gardens end up quite bare in the autumn and winter, mine is a haven for overwintering wildlife within the silvered remnants of perennial plants mixed among winter crops.

Every year, I tweak things, sometimes intentionally, sometimes because a plant has had its own ideas. While it's tempting to present it all as perfectly planned, I'll admit a fair bit of it happened by happy accident. The 'guild garden' is a living experiment, and it's taught me more about growing than any gardening book ever could. My main rule? Observe first, act later. Plants have a funny way of showing you what they need if you give them time.

And while my garden has grown, so too has the community around it. Through my online videos, I've realised just how many people share the same hopes (and frustrations!) when it comes to gardening. We all want to grow things that thrive, to feel capable rather than overwhelmed. That's my mission: helping gardeners grow with confidence.

Above: Observation is a key gardening skill, so ensure there's somewhere to sit and watch

In a few short years, my 'guild garden' has truly become a garden with purpose that connects me with food and beauty, the environment and to other passionate gardeners. And honestly? That's what keeps me growing.

Niall's top tips

- Not all crops need to follow the well-worn path of 'sow, prick out, plant out, harvest, clear away'. Fruiting trees and bushes are affordable as young bare-root specimens, are super tasty, and only need to be planted once and given a yearly prune.
- Make companion planting your not-so-secret weapon. A slight reduction in crop volume is far outweighed by the reduction in pests and increase in biodiversity.
- Redefine productivity. Grow the things you love, that taste better grown at home, or that simply can't be bought easily in the supermarket. Even small harvests will make you feel special.

Above: Niall recommends growing what you love and redefining productivity with lower maintenance mixed planting

Watch Niall in action: *https://www.youtube.com/c/NiallGardens*

See Niall's latest ideas on Instagram at: *niallgardens*

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PLANT WATCH

With **Michael Perry**

Exciting recommendations from our expert plantsman

Princettia® Indian Red is a beautiful and compact alternative to poinsettias and is more tolerant of low temperatures

7 new plants for a stylish Christmas

Michael reveals some standout alternatives to brighten the festive season

Each year, the run-up to Christmas brings the same familiar favourites: red poinsettias, glossy holly, maybe a splash of cyclamen. But the world of festive plants is changing fast, with breeders and growers offering creative alternatives that feel fresh, colourful, and just a little bit surprising. This season, why not give tradition a pass? Here are seven standout plants bringing new style to Christmas displays.

Streptocarpus 'Holly'

A true alternative to the standard festive red, *Streptocarpus* 'Holly' combines soft, velvety foliage with delicate flowers in wintery shades of white and crimson, and flowers just in time for the big day. Compact and elegant, it's perfect for indoor decoration, offering a cheerful splash of colour that lasts well beyond Christmas too. Easy to care for, it's the plant that quietly says 'modern tradition'.

Princettia® Indian Red

A contemporary take on the poinsettia, Princettia® offers a more compact, refined plant with masses of small, vibrant bracts. Its real superpower is that it can cope with colder temperatures, which makes it a little bit less fussy in the home.

Princettia® is quickly becoming the go-to choice for those wanting poinsettia elegance with a modern twist.

Guzmania 'Fiero Red'

Bring a tropical glow to your Christmas decor with *Guzmania* 'Fiero Red'. Its brilliant scarlet flower spikes and glossy green rosettes evoke the look of a poinsettia and give a lovely festive warmth while adding a touch of the exotic.

Long-lasting and low-maintenance, this bromeliad is a statement piece for contemporary interiors!

Euphorbia 'Queen Gabriella'

While poinsettias belong to the *Euphorbia* family, 'Queen Gabriella' brings a distinctly regal touch. The breeding is amazing, since the original euphorbia of this type had big thorns and tiny flowers. The colour is a natural fit for the holiday season, yet its durability elevates it above poinsettia, dare I say.

Begonia 'Autumn Crinkle'

For a subtler, textural take on festive foliage, *Begonia* 'Autumn Crinkle' is a true hidden gem. It has deeply rippled bronze-orange leaves that shimmer under soft light. Maybe pair it with gold accents or soft candlelight for a luxurious, moody Christmas look.

Poinsettia 'Kayla Red'

No Christmas list would be complete without a poinsettia, but 'Kayla Red' brings a modern touch to this classic.

I adore the oak leaf shape of the foliage and this unique shimmering pink shade. Add in an improved shelf life, and you have the perfect Christmas plant.

Schlumbergera 'Wild Cactus'

Schlumbergera is also known as the Christmas cactus and this 'Wild Cactus' cultivar is a playful, modern introduction with bold blooms that look like little roses.

An exciting alternative to the usual Christmas cactus, selected in Denmark, and hopefully in garden centres by next year, look out for this one.

mrplantgeek.substack.com

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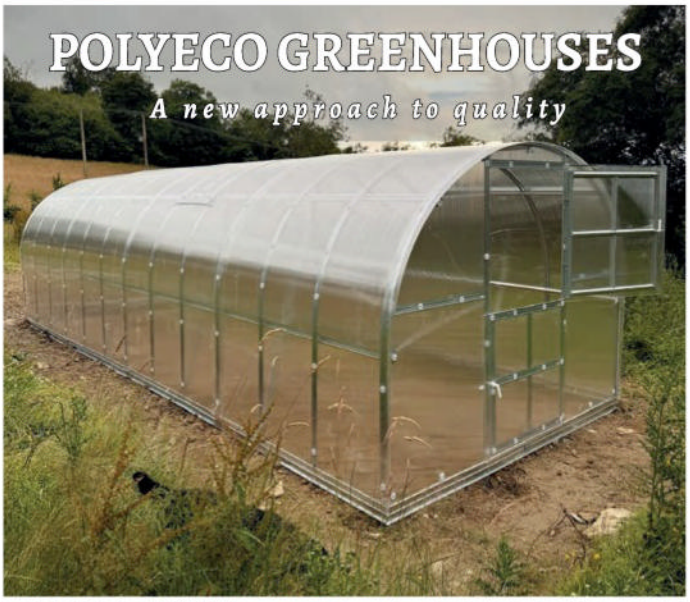

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How to use brilliant bracken

From material for wreaths to homemade ground beetle refuges and natural plant insulation, there are many uses for this wild plant, as **Toby** explains

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Holly and ivy might be the go-to plants for Christmas greenery, but there is another foraged leaf I wouldn't be without. Bracken might not be green, but it's always on my yuletide gather list as it has more uses than a Swiss Army Knife.

The bronze fronds are as handsome as a fox trotting through snow-covered woodland and an excellent ingredient in a wreath. Like a frame around a painting, they are a foil that brings out the lustre in neighbouring evergreens and makes winter berries glow.

Bracken performs the same trick in the wild and from snow-dusted moors to motorway embankments, where the bracken grows, the pines and birch trees look brighter. But it does more than make other plants look good, it can also be used to make them feel better.

How bracken helps insulate other plants during winter

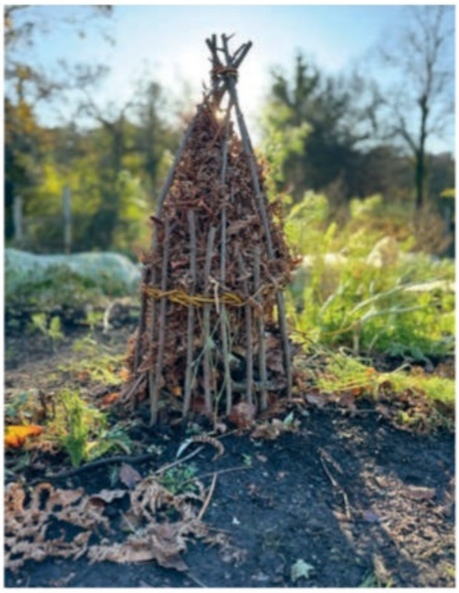
You see, bracken is herbaceous, meaning that the living or green part of the plant goes to ground for winter. When this happens, the colour and chlorophyll drain

© Toby Buckland

Toby uses bracken for festive decorations and also to help his garden and its creatures survive the bitter winter weeks

© Toby Buckland

Toby uses pruned sticks and bracken to create tipis that provide shelter for beneficial insects such as ground beetles



© Toby Buckland

Above: Toby's bracken tipis are an attractive and practical addition to his garden in winter

from the plant's 'cheeks' but even so, the dead tops keep their shape and 'fluff' right through until the spring. And this makes them excellent insulators for tender plants growing round about. Like a quilt, the fluffy nature of winter bracken fronds keeps out the cold, and because the foliage locks together, you don't need twine to hold them in place.

Keeping out the cold is only half the story, and thanks to its high natural wax or latex content, a lagging of bracken will also keep what it covers dry but not airless. Unlike fleece that is best removed if it gets wet and slumps, bracken can stay in place.

Foraging for bracken

It's also much easier on the eye, though it's not a fern you'd want in your garden as it has 'imperial ambitions'. If left to spread, it can and does cover whole hillsides. On the upside, this means there's never a shortage of supply and I gather car-bootfuls from the moors where I work without making a dint in its abundance.

The moors have thin, acidic soil (bracken is an indicator of acid conditions and in areas where it grows, ericaceous azaleas and rhodies will also thrive), and core to their management is curbing the bracken's vigour. This is done using an ancient technique based on clever horticulture rather than chemicals. During the summer the bracken is bent under a heavy roller pulled behind a tractor. Back in the day, the job was one for heavy horses pulling rollers hewn from granite and you still see these 'giants' rolling pins' abandoned in Devon hedge banks from when they were last used, or repurposed as gate posts.

Rolling, as opposed to cutting, kinks the stems that bleed so much sap the bracken goes into retreat, making space for wildlife-friendly heather to take centre stage. It never goes completely though, but waits on path edges and under tree-lines, hoping for the chance to spread again.

How to use bracken in the garden

It's the bronzy tops of these plants that I gather for my garden and every Christmas, I give a bracken hat to my tree fern and create a bracken coat for the stems of the bananas. I also use bracken tops to help beneficial insects on my veg plot.

A vegetable garden is a challenging place for beetles and pollinators as it's always changing. As crops go over, roots, stems and remaining leaves are cleared to the compost heap and while this removes unwanted fungal diseases and pests, it also removes the protective covering that beneficial insects - aphid-eating lacewings and slug-eating beetles - use to hide under from the birds.

Above: Bracken leaves contain high levels of natural wax that provides insulation without becoming airless and soggy

Toby collects car bootfuls of bracken fronds to protect his tender plants, including tree ferns and bananas

So on my plot I've added protective stick 'tipis' (wigwam-like structures) that are lashed together with willow and packed with cosy bracken. They don't have to be fancy, just five to 10 waist-high sticks, pushed into the soil and tied together with twine, is fine. Then fill the frame with bracken, sticks, hollow-stemmed stalks and even old bricks (the ones with holes in the top are best) - in fact, any material that creates nooks and crannies for insects to overwinter.

Above: Give ground beetles shelter - they are brilliant natural pest predators

Above: As well as having a practical use, the brown bracken fronds of winter look beautiful when covered with glittering frost

Encouraging brilliant ground beetles

I always put a generous layer of leaves at the bottom as this is where ground beetles like to hole up and lay eggs for winter. Ground beetles - as if you didn't know - are excellent pest predators, eating aphids, small snails, slug eggs, vine weevils, leatherjackets and moth larvae. They even follow slime trails to hunt for slugs!

The UK has more than 350 different species; some that overwinter as adults and others as larvae which complete their life cycles in the spring. And the more of these pest predators you have at the start of the growing season, the better your year will be.

The beetles prefer to hunt at night to avoid the attention of birds and if I unearth one while digging or tidying, I scoop it up and put it into one of my tipis to keep it safe. If it's somewhere it wants to stay, it'll keep close to the tipi and patrol for unwanted pests.

Ground beetles don't travel long distances and prefer to hunt near known cover, so I've created a neighbourhood of tipis, spaced 4.5m (15ft) apart which, fingers crossed, means the whole plot is covered. They resemble a plantation of home-spun mini Christmas trees. There might not be paper-wrapped presents around them, but if the beetles stay they'll be the most welcome gift of all and one that goes on giving!

Merry Christmas and here's to a great gardening year in 2026!

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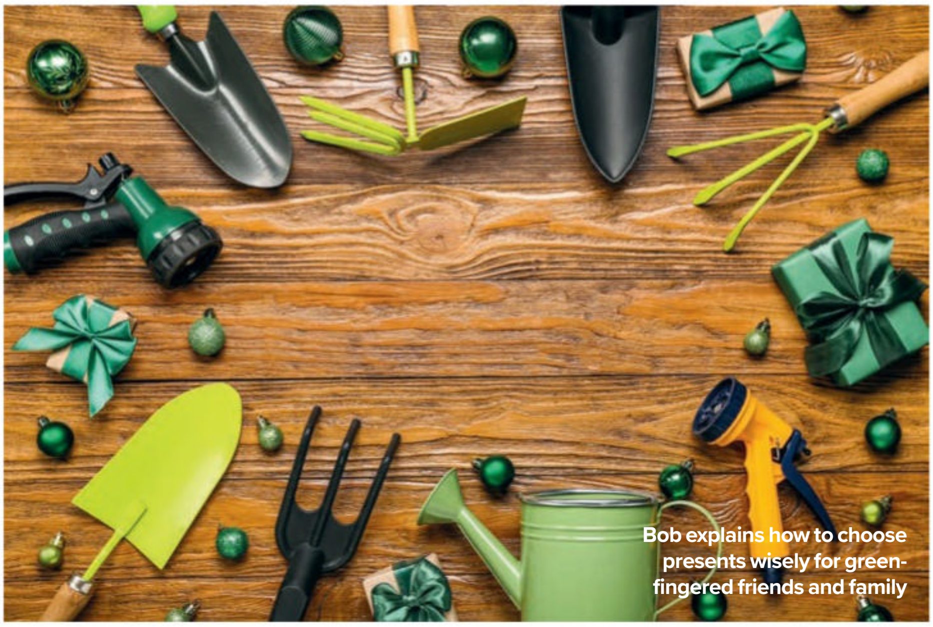
GARDEN MUSINGS

with **Bob Flowerdew**, long-standing *AG* contributor, broadcaster and all-round expert.

How to buy presents for gardeners

Bob Flowerdew explains which gifts to avoid, and what might be gratefully received



Bob explains how to choose presents wisely for green-fingered friends and family

The season of merriment is upon us, time's growing short and we have that perennial vexation of finding suitable, affordable presents. We supposedly attempt to match these to the recipient in the hope they'll appreciate them. The difficulty is doing so with those you know fairly well, it's even harder with those whom we're less familiar, so to avoid wasted effort we may search for some guide, such as their hobbies or interests.

As keen gardeners, we're easily identifiable and so may receive 'appropriate' presents. Now if these come from other gardeners, at least they're likely to be of some use. However, when the donor is a non-gardener they may be tempted into rather 'foolish' things. Feel blessed if you've not yet received a 'trowel & fork set' of a quality suited for the beach rather than the allotment! Or worse, a 'complete grow XX at home kit' of plastic pot and saucer, dubious packet of seed and a small plastic bag of dust-dry compost.

Choose quality gifts that last

We almost need to issue a public warning. Avoid signs that pop up blaring 'Ideal gifts for gardeners' as they will seldom ever be of any use to any gardener. Sadly, such gifts are also a hidden danger for the budding or prospective gardener as badly made tools and unsuccessful kits ensure they'll lose interest.

Going back to my point: choosing suitable gifts for anyone is never simple but planning to give gardeners presents can be downright hazardous. Although it seems brazen, I suggest we gardeners make lists, as is often done for weddings, to encourage more suitable and quality choices.

Plant presents can be problematic

Think how hard it is selecting clothes for someone; sizing is important but taste is everything. Likewise to be avoided - unless specifically requested - is giving most plants as presents. They easily become white elephants, kept out of obligation, and it's even worse if they're something that rapidly grows large. Thus bags of bulbs and choice houseplants are less likely to jar than a forest of sapling trees. (Though if you secretly want to give hidden, long-lasting pain, then a couple of vigorous blackberry cultivars should do the job nicely.)

Some things are inherently 'safer'. Another pair of decent secateurs is probably handy to almost every gardener. Balls of twine, packets of nice labels, bundles of canes may seem humble but are actually useful. Gardening books may be appreciated, mine especially so....

One obvious match is eponymous plants, those with the same name as the recipient, such as giving me the gooseberry 'Crown Bob'. Unfortunately, this can be as risky as giving almost any plant, but if you're lucky enough to spot a packet of seeds of a variety bearing their name, then that's a very neat yet inexpensive stocking filler.

So we come to the nitty gritty question, what would I like? Nowadays, I ask my friends to send me a card and instead of a gift, make a donation to any worthy, preferably 'green' charity.

You can find out more about Bob via his website **www.bobflowerdew.com**

Above: Houseplants are a safer option for presents, especially low-maintenance options such as succulents

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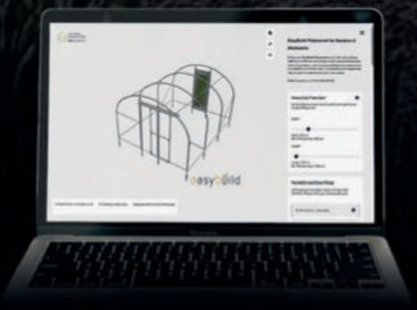

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Please send me item(s) indicated

ORDER CODE: SUDSOP9

Code	Item Description	Price	Qty	Total
G4789	Metal Raised Garden Bed 60x60cm ~~£49.99~~	£29.99		
KF0536	Metal Raised Garden Bed 60x60cm x2 ~~£99.98~~	£49.99		
G4790	Metal Raised Garden Bed 80x60cm ~~£59.99~~	£39.99		
KF0537	Metal Raised Garden Bed 80x60cm x2 ~~£119.99~~	£49.99		
G4791	Metal Raised Garden Bed 120x90cm ~~£79.99~~	£49.99		
KF0538	Metal Raised Garden Bed 120x90cm x2 ~~£159.98~~	£89.99		
P&P				£6.99
			Grand Total	

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